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Encounters with antisemitism¹

Abstract

The Holocaust destroyed Jewish communities across Europe and in Poland. Subsequently, in the Soviet bloc, most Jewish survivors were expelled from or coerced into leaving their countries, while the memory of the millennium-long presence of Jews in Poland was thoroughly suppressed. Through the lens of a scholar's personal biography, this article reflects on how snippets of the Jewish past tend to linger on in the form of absent presences, despite the national and systemic norm of erasing any remembrance of Poles of the Jewish religion. This norm used to be the dominant type of antisemitism in communist Poland after 1968, and has largely continued unabated after the fall of communism.

Keywords: absent presence, antisemitism, communist Poland, post-communist Poland, repressed memory.

¹ I would like to thank Jolanta Sujecka for her gentle reminders, and the two anonymous reviewers for their corrections and suggestions for improvement. Obviously, it is I alone who am responsible for any remaining lapses. The spelling of “antisemitism” and “nazi” throughout the text is intentional.

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In my childhood and teenage years spent in communist Poland, the ethnonym “Jew” seldom popped up. It was nowhere to be heard on the radio or on television. The press and mainstream books studiously avoided this word in print. It was a taboo. However, when someone uttered it carelessly in a private conversation, negative emotions suddenly flared up, or the word was woven into an unexpectedly obscene expletive. I woke up to this unsavory reality in the late 1980s, when I accompanied my parents on a sentimental visit to the house of my mother’s school friend in Zawidz Kościelny, a Mazovian village. Both middle-aged ladies talked fondly remembering their youth. Meanwhile, their husbands did the typical male thing of downing successive shots of vodka over a table set with a wide array of the farm’s foodstuffs, such as was not to be had in any shop then, as communist Poland was in the relentless grip of a decade-long economic crisis. I sat and listened. Someone carelessly did it, uttered the awful word “Jew.” The host froze instantaneously, then abruptly stood up from his chair which, pushed back, fell over. He trotted unsteadily to the wider space in front of the table, and with a full swing of his hand hurled his vodka glass down to the living room floor. It did not break. The soft carpet actually caused the glass to bounce back, to the host’s irritation. Quite tipsy, he began yelling at the top of his lungs: “These scabby Jews! Good riddance! A curse on them!” Quickly running out of breath, he continued by spitting on the carpet in order to make his point. His wife tried to calm him down. The visit was over.

In school, Jews made only a fleeting appearance when our history teacher talked about World War II. From the narrative offered in the textbook, it seemed as if only a couple of years before the war, out of nowhere, Jews had arrived in Germany and elsewhere across Central and Eastern Europe. It was as though they had done it on purpose, apparently to annoy Adolf Hitler and his supporters, or “hitlerites” (*hitlerowcy*), as nazis were then commonly referred to in Polish. Just to give them a “reason” to hate and destroy the Jews. Even the now widespread terms “Holocaust” (*Zagłada*) or “genocide” (*ludobójstwo*) were employed only rarely before the fall of communism in 1989. Typically, it was said that Jews had been killed “simply like Hitler’s other victims.” In one of the last grades of elementary school, all children in communist Poland were obliged to go on a school trip to the Auschwitz extermination camp. But neither the teacher in charge nor the guide would say anything about Jews. The camp’s over one million casualties were said to have been Poles, or “people” from Poland and other countries across German-occupied Europe (cf. Małcużyński, 1971, p. 257).



Fig. 1. Jan Czesław Moniuszko, c. 1908, *Koncert Jankiela* (Yankel's Concert) (Moniuszko, c. 1908)

At another time, a Jew popped up during a Polish language and literature lesson. Many hours were spent on reading, memorizing fragments, and analyzing the “Polish national epic poem” *Master Thaddeus* (*Pan Tadeusz*, 1834) written by the “most famous Polish national poet,” Adam Mickiewicz. We could not make head or tail of the story. The poem’s language is antiquated, while the long-gone world of nobles and unfree serfs was strange and all but unknowable to us. On top of this, the plot is inexplicably set in a “Lithuania” that turned out to be located in the then Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic, i.e. within the “fraternal” Soviet Union. Nothing made sense. How come the masterpiece’s “Poland” lay in the USSR? We were told that “as Poles,” we “must know, revere and enjoy” this book of verse. Obviously, we did not, because the ideologized curriculum prevented the teacher from explaining the historical, ethnic and religious intricacies, lest we start asking uncomfortable questions. Learning by rote and pretending what we were expected to feel was the safest mode of “studying.” In this inauspicious context, we were told to focus on the “good Jew” Jankiel’s (Yankel, Jacob) patriotic concert, in the course of which he sings – in a noble’s highfalutin Polish – about the end of Poland-Lithuania, posed as part of Polish national history (Mickiewicz, 1968, pp. 575–581).



Fig. 2. The scar left by the mezuzah removed from the doorpost in a contemporary house in Mogielnica near Grójec in Poland (*Mogielnica*, 2020)

This “absent presence” was the sole mode of existence reserved for Jews in the national-communist Poland. It was like a telltale indented or cemented-over empty place left by a mezuzah on a doorpost. Until recently, post-mezuzah scars used to be quite a ubiquitous sight across Polish villages and towns. We glanced at them as part of the “landscape” and saw nothing, or perhaps a case of shoddy workmanship, or a sign of the neglect in the maintenance of residential buildings that was typical at that time. Nowadays, current owners are more careful about erasing such unwanted absent presences of the rightful owners of yesteryear. In democratic and capitalist Poland with its borders invitingly open to visitors, the fear is stronger than ever before – the fear that one day, descendants or relatives of those “former owners” might come back to reclaim their property.

I was born and educated in Upper Silesia. Most of the historical region was part of the *deutsche Ostgebiete* (German territories east of the Oder-Neisse line), which the victorious Allies passed to postwar Poland at the Potsdam Conference in 1945. After the “transfer,” these areas became officially known as the “Recovered Territories” (*Ziemie Odzyskane*) in

Polish propaganda. A tenth of interwar Poland's 3 million Poles of the Jewish religion or origin ("Polish Jews") survived, mainly in the Soviet Union (Hirsz, 1998, p. 34). These 300,000 people came back home to their villages, towns and city quarters. Their Catholic neighbors were appalled, fearing that these survivors might demand the return of their real estate and movable property. All of it had already been "redistributed," hence some neighbors and thugs made sure none would be given back to its Jewish owners. A Jewish survivor could be killed with impunity or just "disappear;" the problem was finally resolved (Krzyżanowski, 2016; Nowak-Arczewski, 2017). This antisemitic sentiment erupted in numerous pogroms, the biggest and most bloody one taking place in Kielce in 1946 (Tokarska-Bakir, 2018). Afterward, Jews either decided to forsake Poland for good or moved to the Recovered Territories in order to start afresh (Bronsztejn, 1993).



Fig. 3. The Gershon Dua [Jewish] House of Culture (דוא ג. דוא) *kultur hoyz a. n. fun g. dua*) in Legnica (Wysocki, 2017)

They re-established their communities in Lower Silesia, immediately to the west of Upper Silesia. This veritable socialist Neo-Yiddishland thrived for a decade, complete with Yiddish-language schools, clubs, theaters, cinemas, houses of culture, newspapers, organizations, communist party branches, cooperatives, restaurants, you name it. Then stalinism was over. Soviet-style communist internationalism, the same for all the Soviet bloc

countries, was replaced with national communisms, each with its own “country-specific characteristics.” It soon transpired that antisemitism was a universal feature of this “national turn” in the Soviet bloc. During the latter half of the 1950s most Jews left Poland for Israel and the west. The *Yidisher Yishev in Nidershlezye* (איך נידערשלעזיע) Jewish Community in Lower Silesia) waned (Egit, 1991, pp. 44–114; Węgrzyn, 2016). The 1968 expulsion of the remaining Jews from Poland put an end to this ambitious post-Holocaust Neo-Yiddishland. What interwar nationalists had failed to achieve, national communists managed to effect, i.e. the denial of Polishness to Poles of the Jewish religion or origin, coupled with the successive revocation of their Polish citizenship (Głuchowski & Polonsky, 2009).

All this took place *before* my childhood. During the 1970s and 1980s, when my friends and I happened to visit the Lower Silesian capital of Wrocław or the historical region’s picturesque old towns, monasteries and palaces, there was nothing left in sight of this formerly vibrant Jewish presence. On the other hand, we knew about Lower Silesia’s Germans having been expelled to postwar Germany, so we were always on the lookout for any inscriptions in German. It was quite popular to speak about the “former German lands” (*ziemie poniemieckie*) when referring to the “Recovered Territories.” It was no shame to live in a *poniemiecki* (“formerly German”) house, eat with a *poniemiecki* fork, sit on a *poniemiecki* chair, and kindle fire with a *poniemiecki* book printed in distinctive Fraktur letters (cf. Kuszyk, 2019). Yet, no one would openly admit that their apartment, farm, sewing machine or cow could be *pożydowski* (“formerly Jewish”) (Tryczyk, 2020, p. 16). Germans were awful, but they were Christians after all. On the other hand, Jews were Jews because they were not Christians. They professed Judaism, and failed to recognize Jesus as the messiah promised in the Torah. Jews still had not “graduated” from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This clear sign of their Jewish “backwardness” made us, real (i.e. Catholic) Poles, and even Germans, a lot “better” than them.

Maybe that was why... We thought that “it” could explain why an elderly neighbor or relative talked like that... Strangely. For instance, an old but always radiant granny-like neighbor liked to sagely opine that Hitler was a bad man, as our teachers kept telling us in school. Yet, in her opinion, this nazi leader did some good things, for example, “he rid us of those Yids (*żydki*²).” Observing our alarmed faces with amusement, the neighbor

² The Polish derogatory term *żydek* (pl *żydki*) for a Jew is a diminutive of the neutral term *Żyd* (pl *Żydzi*). Diminutives in a Slavic language tend to function as terms of endearment, but when employed with ethnonyms, they become terms of offence. For instance, should one say *polaczek* (“little Polish man,” pl *polaczki*) instead of *Polak* (“Polish man,” pl *Polacy*), a Polish person ad-

added soothingly that “a small Hitler would have been sufficient.” This was intended to mean that in such a case the Führer would have busied himself exclusively with good works, for example the Holocaust...



Fig. 3. The synagogue in Cosel (now Koźle within the town of Kędzierzyn-Koźle in Poland), Upper Silesia, Germany (Trucks, 2020)

Meanwhile, thanks to the school subject of civics (*wychowanie obywatelskie*), I learned about communist Poland’s Constitution. Among other things – like the current Polish Constitution, and its interwar predecessors for that matter – this document says that all Polish citizens are equal and enjoy the same rights, irrespective of language, religion, race, or nationality (ethnicity). Me being me, I proposed to my friends that, logically, Jews are Poles, just like Catholics or Lutherans are Poles. No one dubbed us “Catholics” or “Lutherans” on the basis of faith, so we are all Poles, as there is no such a thing as the “Catholic or Lutheran nation.” In

dressed in this manner would definitely take offence.

the all-embracing Polishness, the fact that Jacek and I attended Catholic mass on Sunday did not distinguish us from Mr. Fudala. Together with his elderly wife, he made a point of frequenting the mostly empty Lutheran church in our town of Kędzierzyn, where a minister from Zabrze came every fortnight to perform the Protestant liturgy. My friends smirked and nodded. They had learned to suffer and disregard the crazier of my ideas. After all, there was no synagogue around for putative Jews to attend. (Only in 2019 did I learn that such a synagogue had existed in the nearby town of Koźle. The nazis burnt it down in 1937.)



Fig. 5. St Mikołaj (Nicholas) Church in Kędzierzyn (*Saint Nicolas*, 2007)

I took no notice of my friends' patronizing condescension. There was nothing to discuss. No Jews were around. None of us knew any. We had no idea what a Jew might look like or how they might speak. In communist Poland, everyone spoke Polish and was a Pole, period. Playing soccer was more fun than wasting our tongues on all this empty talk. It was the last (eighth) grade of elementary school. The two years of strikes in 1980-1981 ushered in unprecedented civic freedoms, alongside the rise of the Solidarity Independent Self-Governing Trade Union. Ten million people joined this

trade union. This was too much for the Soviet overlords in the Kremlin. A *non*-communist trade union could not have two and half times more members than the ruling communist Polish United Workers' Party, PZPR (Topolski, 1994, p. 203). The communist authorities got their act together and finally clamped martial law on Poland in December 1981. However, they left the Catholic Church largely untouched, when priests stayed away from politics. With my friends, I continued to attend religious instruction classes in preparation for confirmation (*bierzmowanie*). It was fun, the classes were held in a room high up in the parish church's dilapidated bell tower.



Fig. 6. The Lutheran Church in Kędzierzyn (*Kościół Ewangelicko-Augsburski*, 2012)

The suffragan bishop of the Opole Diocese was soon to visit our town. The priest who taught us in this bell tower advised that we should read the Bible and think about confirmation names that we would like to adopt. During that time I was hoping to become an astronomer. To this end, I studied physics hard and read voraciously about the history of physics and natural sciences. At that tender age, my school friends adorned their rooms with posters of rock stars such as ABBA, AC/DC, Freddie Mercury or Suzi

Quatro. Yet, I chose Isaac Newton as my preferred role model.³ No posters of this “discoverer” of gravitation were available, but nevertheless I selected his name for my confirmation. In a rehearsal of the forthcoming ceremony, the priest enquired about our onomastic choices. He was gentle with me, suggesting that I ought to choose a name from the New Testament. I said I would, but did not. Astronomy and gravitation were too serious a matter to give up on my equally serious choice.

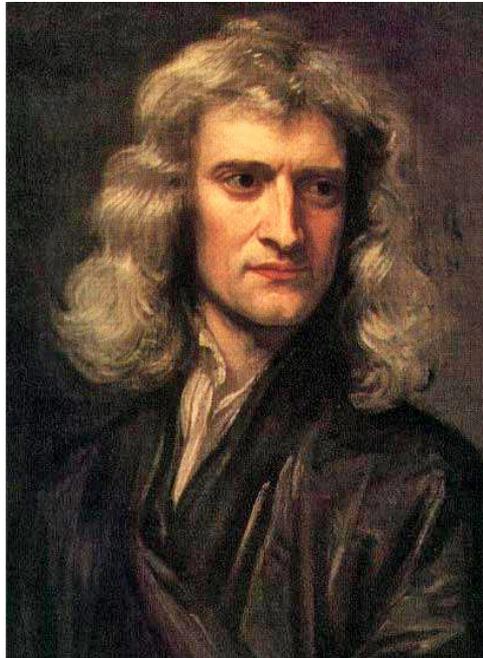


Fig. 7. Isaac Newton in 1689, a portrait by Godfrey Kneller (*Portrait*, 1992)

On the day of the confirmation ceremony, my godmother was a step behind me, instead of my parents who had been detained by their work duties. My friends and I stood in a row, lined up in front of the altar. In the reverent silence pregnant with meaning, the altar’s golden surfaces reflected the flames of the candles. The suffragan slowly progressed from

³ I learned about the life and discoveries of Isaac Newton from the *Wielka encyklopedia powszechna* (Great Universal Encyclopedia; Suchodolski, 1966). Yet it was not until the early 21st century, after reading Henryk Grynberg’s unforgettable *Memorbuch* (Grynberg, 2000), that I realized that this flagship reference of the communist period was an initiative and the crowning achievement of Adam Bromberg’s publishing career. As a Jew, he was arrested in 1968, and expelled to Sweden the following year.

one of my friends to the next, extending his palms over their heads and hastily reciting the canonical formula under his breath. As taught by the priest, each of us handed the suffragan a little slip of paper with the desired confirmation name legibly written on it. On mine the name “Izaak” (Isaac) stood out in block letters. The bishop was taken aback, stopped briefly, but it was too small an incident to disturb the ceremony. He confirmed me as “Izaa-aak,” unduly prolonging the pronunciation of the doubled vowel /a/. The suffragan actually made a point of inserting a brief pause and reading the name’s two a’s separately. The nice priest who had prepared us for confirmation rolled his eyes and sighed in exasperation: “Icek...”

I took no notice. During communism we learned not to see so many things that were as they were because they were so. At that time I knew no better, either. Only years later did I realize that “Icchak” (יקיץ, Yitzhak) is the original Hebrew rendering of the Old Testament name “Isaac,” meaning “he will laugh.” In turn, “Icek” is a Polish-language diminutive of the Hebrew form of this name, a term of endearment by which a mother would call her son, or a lover would prefer it in an intimate situation to the formal “Icchak.” But after the end of communism, when antisemitic literature immediately appeared at newsstands, I understood that “Icek” is a popular Polish-language term of scorn for a Jew.



Fig. 8. An example of antisemitic propaganda, widely available in post-communist Poland

During our childhood, my brother and I spent summers at our maternal grandparents' farm in the hamlet of Jaworowo Kolonia, located in the northeastern corner of Mazovia. At the turn of the 1990s, I was surprised to learn that Mazovia was also the home region of Isaac Bashevis Singer (זינגער יצחק באַשעװיס). He was born in the village of Leoncin, some 90 kilometers southeast of Jaworowo Kolonia, on the other side of the Vistula River. All his racy and colorful stories and novels of the interwar Yiddish-speaking world became runaway bestsellers when published in Polish translations following the end of communism. To Polish readers, Singer's books presented a curiously homely place, full of Hasidim in traditional garb and familiar Polish place-names. For equal measure, numerous plotlines seamlessly merged Poland with America. Many Polish readers – desiring a normal life – would have loved to leave Poland, then in the grip of the painful post-communist transition, for the United States. Singer's books at least offered some solace by transporting the reader to this yearned-for land of the free and well-to-do.

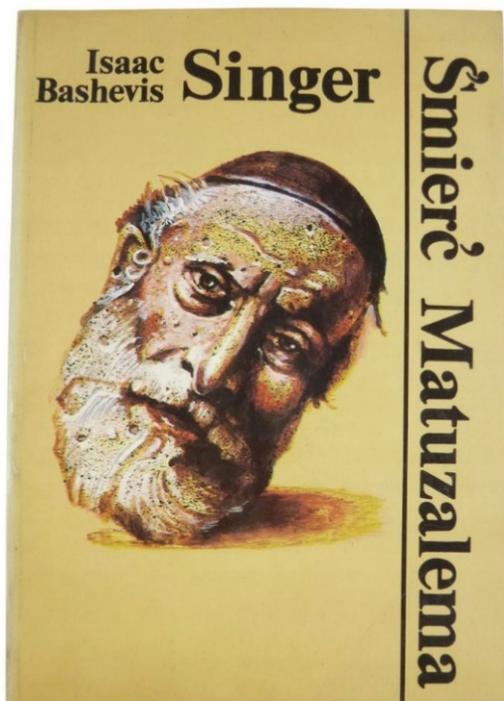


Fig. 9. Isaac Bashevis Singer (1990). *Śmierć Matuzalema* (*The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories*, Singer, 1988)

In this peculiar situation, in quickly turned out Polish translations, Singer's writings became the best escapist literature, an ersatz America, a badly needed shrink's couch for Poles confused and exhausted by the unexpected onset of democracy and capitalism in their country. However, in Polish readers' conversations, Singer remained a through-and-through American writer, who just "happened" to have *chosen* Poland as the location for a bit of exoticism. Even the fact that Singer was this world's sole Yiddish-language author who won a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978 did not convince anyone to see him as a Pole. After the Holocaust, Jews belonged in America and Israel, *not* in Poland. It did not matter that Singer was a citizen of interwar Poland and spoke Polish. His novels and collections of stories were fine, but commemorating him in Poland in the name of a street or with a monument was seen as "highly undesirable" ("*Nie chcemy*", 2011). Three decades later, in 2020, tellingly, almost none of Singer's novels or volumes of stories remain in print on the Polish book market. In the prosperous capitalist Poland of today, Poles do not need any Jew to explain capitalism to them, or to provide them with solace.

It is all but forgotten that in the writer's Polish-language documents, Singer's name was given as "Icchok Zynger" in the Polish phonetic spelling (Adamczyk-Garbowska, 1994, p. 175). Instead, the English rendering of Singer's name is exclusively employed on the covers of the Polish translations of his books. Much public and even political attention in Poland is paid to the country's winners of the Nobel Prize. Yet, Singer is *not* included in this vaunted roster. Why? First, because he left Poland for the United States in 1935, just in time to escape certain death in the Holocaust. (Most of his family perished in German-occupied Poland.) Second, because Singer did not write in Polish and received the Nobel Prize as an American citizen. And yes, because he was "really" a Jew, not a Pole. An "Icek," as is clearly visible from his first name.

Although all the Polish constitutions prohibit this type of discrimination, even nowadays Polish winners of the Nobel Prize are excluded from the popularly accepted "official" list of Polish Nobel laureates if they are deemed to be "Jews." On the other hand, these days the number of Nobel laureates is employed as one of the vital metrics that can push a university up in international rankings. In such a purely transactional mode, the University of Warsaw is not shy to embrace as many as three Jewish graduates who happened to win the Nobel Prize, namely Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (מנחם בגין; originally, Mieczysław Biegun in Polish), British nuclear physicist and leading proponent of nuclear disarmament Sir Joseph Rotblat (Józef Rotblat) and, finally, US economist Leonid Hurwicz (*Nobliści*, 2017). Obviously, for Polish domestic consumption, all three continue to

be excluded from the “official” list of Polish Nobel laureates. At best, they may feature in an adjunct list, tortuously titled *Pozostali laureaci mający znaczące związki z Polską* (“Other laureates with significant connections to Poland”) (“Lista laureatów”, 2020). In polite speech, instead of offending a Pole of the Jewish religion or origin with the traditional antisemitic pejorative “Icek” or *żydek*, the euphemism “a person with significant connections to Poland” is employed. Tellingly, the English-language Wikipedia does not distinguish between these two groups and considers all of them to be Polish Nobel laureates, irrespective of language or creed – which is in full agreement with the Polish Constitution (“List”, 2020).

During the 1970s and 1980s my brother and I knew nothing about any Jews in Jaworowo Kolonia or its vicinity. A Jewish neighbor or itinerant peddler might fleetingly appear in our Granny’s stories about bygone days, like a German (Lutheran) one for that matter. She offered no explanation. In Granny’s words, Jews and Germans were good people. She repeatedly recollected a German soldier who had taught her how to cook jelly (*kisiel*), but always added that “the Germans tormented the Jews too much.” Just-so stories indeed. Only when I started studying the history of Central Europe in the 1990s did I realize that before the war, the Polish border with Germany’s province of East Prussia had been located a mere 40 kilometers north of Granny’s hamlet. Before World War II, Catholics, Judaists and Lutherans used to live together in this area for centuries.

For a change of scenery, we often took a bus for the trip of seven kilometers to the village of Zawidz Kościelny, where the nearest church was located. On Sundays we attended holy mass. But I liked the colorful church holidays best, when stalls with sweets, toys and devotional items were put up around the church. It was all so exciting, folksy, and staunchly anti-communist. Back then, I knew nothing of German soldiers, Polish policemen and god-fearing Catholic peasants who had literally hunted for Jews in Mazovian forests, fields and swamps during the Holocaust (cf. Grabowski, 2013). Polish school curricula did not include Singer’s books as required reading, or any openly Jewish authors who had decided to write in Polish despite all odds. Just a couple of years ago, I happened to read Henryk Grynberg’s debut short novel *Żydowska wojna* (1965; *The Jewish War*, 2001; Grynberg, 1965, 2001) and his later work *Dziedzictwo* (1993, *Inheritance*; Grynberg, 1993). Drawing on his own childhood experiences in Mazovia, the writer depicts this “hunt for Jews” in hauntingly laconic and matter-of-fact prose.



Fig. 10. St Marcin (Martin) Church in Zawidz Kościelny (*Old church*, 2009)

No one told my brother and me that Poles of the Jewish religion had tended to constitute a third to a half of the inhabitants in the villages and towns strewn across the sandy Mazovian countryside, that Yiddish had been a language of everyday life alongside Polish, that pious Hasidim had diligently attended synagogues, like their Catholic neighbors had churches. When at my grandparents', I never caught sight of a single synagogue. The Nazi destruction of Jewish temples had been as thorough as that of the Jews themselves. Yet, in 2020, in his new book *Drzazga. Kłamstwa silniejsze niż śmierć* (*The Splinter: Lies Stronger Than Death*), Mirosław Tryczyk (2020) uncovered yet another absent presence to me.



Fig. 11. The church bell tower in Zawidz Kościelny (*Zawidz Kościelny – dzwonnica*, 2012)

The old church in Zawidz Kościelny was wooden, its walls full of cracks through which we would peer outside. The floorboards creaked. On Sundays

the place was crowded, sweat mingling with the sweet smell of perfume. When the sermon was particularly long and monotonous, we would sneak out when no one was watching, especially when it was sunny and warm. There was so much to do. We loitered around. The rather small bell tower never failed to catch our attention. It stood separate from the church and was crowned with a bulbous dome more reminiscent of an Orthodox than a Catholic church building. However, no Orthodox Christians had lived in this area before or after the war.

As he writes in his book, Tryczyk (2020, pp. 13–14) learned that the bell tower's cupola had originally adorned the entrance gate of the famous wooden Great Synagogue (*Wielka Synagoga*) in Sierpc (שערפץ), built in the Moorish style. Or maybe it was even the synagogue's entire entrance gate that was converted into the church bell tower in Zawidz. The matter should be investigated further by an art historian. On the religious holiday of Sukkot in late September 1939, the Germans burnt the Sierpc synagogue and cruelly humiliated the Jews who had gathered for prayers (Kowalski, 2010). Again, no one knows how the synagogue's entrance gate was transported to Zawidz, or who paid for the expenses involved and took the decision to convert this structure into the still-standing bell tower. Obviously, no plaque informs about the fact that this now Catholic bell tower was plundered from the Sierpc Great Synagogue.

How many examples like this are there? How many absent presences of Poles of the Jewish religion or origin are there, which one saw in one's childhood but only learned to notice and recognize almost half a century later? My grandparents and parents have already passed away. I have no one to ask. My questions abound, but are bound to remain unanswered. Unfortunately, I have to rely on suspicions and suppositions.

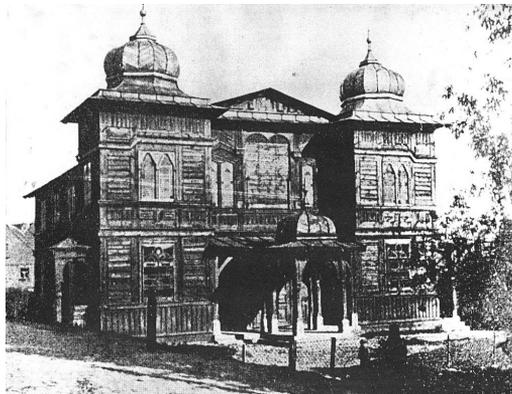


Fig. 12. The Great Synagogue in Sierpc (*Synagogue*, c. 1920)

Another thing still bothers me. Our parents used to make a big point of bathing my brother and me thoroughly when we were kids, at least once a week. We were scrubbed squeaky clean every Friday. Friday was the week's main bathing day in our home. With the privilege of hindsight, I can say that from a practical point of view this custom did not make much sense in communist Poland. In those days, there was no weekend to look forward to. On Saturday, as on any other workday, adults went to their jobs and children to school. All this meticulous scrubbing was intended to make us presentable in church during holy mass on Sunday. Of course, all the work was often for nothing if we seized an opportunity and played soccer with friends after school on Saturday. In spite of being so impractical, this bathing tradition was also practiced at our grandparents' place in Jaworowo Kolonia. As a result, extra emergency baths tended to be taken on Saturday evenings in summer, especially during the harvest time.



Fig. 13. The restored mikveh in the White Stork Synagogue (Synagogue zum Weißen Storch), Wrocław (Breslau), (*Mikveh*, 2019)

I inquired of Poland's leading expert on matters Jewish, Konstanty Gebert, what explanation there might be for Friday baths in a Catholic household. He suggested that a given family might be of Jewish origin, this very origin forgotten and suppressed for the sake of safety and blending in. An absent presence, indeed, utterly unnoticed by those who continue

cultivating it in subsequent generations. However, another explanation, more plausible in this case, is that Catholic peasants in Mazovia considered some customs of their Jewish neighbors “healthy” on account of the widespread myth that Jews tend to be more prosperous and educated than other people. Obviously, from the Jewish perspective, such Friday bathing, usually in the morning and in the communal mikveh (מקווה), was part and parcel of the preparations for Shabbos (שבת in Yiddish).

I recently asked my godmother about our family’s custom of Friday baths that continued at least until the turn of the 1980s. She is my mother’s younger sister. I thought she would know. But my godmother keeps repeating that she does not remember anything about this custom. Another silence, a weekly practice of just three and a half decades ago willed into the convenient fog of oblivion. It is better not to remember. Does it matter that another absent presence will continue to haunt new generations in the future (cf. Grynberg, 2017)?

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Spotkania z antysemityzmem

Zagłada zniszczyła społeczności żydowskie w Europie i w Polsce. Następnie w bloku sowieckim większość Żydów, którzy przeżyli, wygnano lub zmuszono do wyjazdu, a pamięć o tysiącletniej obecności Żydów w Polsce została całkowicie stłumiona. Artykuł ten, z perspektywy osobistej biografii badacza, stanowi zadumę nad tym, jak fragmenty żydowskiej przeszłości mają tendencję do trwania w formie nieobecnej obecności, pomimo systemowo-narodowej normy wymazywania jakiegokolwiek pamięci o Polakach religii żydowskiej. Norma ta była dominującym rodzajem antysemityzmu w komunistycznej Polsce po roku 1968. Po upadku komunizmu raczej nic się nie zmieniło w tym względzie.

Słowa kluczowe: antysemityzm, nieobecna obecność, Polska postkomunistyczna, PRL, wyparta pamięć.

Note

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