

*The Shoah in Contemporary Polish Fiction
(after 1989)*

This article takes a look at contemporary Polish prose dealing with theme of the Shoah. “Contemporary,” in this case, means fiction published in the 1990s and after the year 2000, thus already in the twenty-first century. It therefore comprises the last twenty five years. The fundamental categories used here in the analyses of texts, are the memory and post-memory of the Shoah¹. The authors who have published works over the last twenty five years are either witnesses of these events (i.e. Children of the Holocaust)², or – more often – representatives of the second or third generation after the Shoah. For the latter, the Holocaust is only a historical event and a cultural artefact³. They are Polish writers either with or without Jewish roots. The Jewish origin, however, is in this case hardly significant. The most interesting issues are the new aspects these authors introduce to reflections on the Shoah in literature. Theoretical and descriptive secondary literature about the issue I intend to discuss is fairly abundant⁴. Holocaust fiction is a subject of interest to many literary scholars, who have published numerous monographs⁵ and articles (reviews)⁶ about it.

¹ Cf. M. HIRSCH, *The Generation of Post-memory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York 2012; IDEM, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge 2002; B. DĄBROWSKI, *Postpamięć, zależność, trauma*, in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością*, ed. by R. Nycz, Kraków 2011; *Narracja i tożsamość. Narracje w kulturze*, t. 1, ed. by W. Bolecki, R. Nycz, Warszawa 2004.

² Cf. J. KOWALSKA-LEDER, *Doświadczenie Zagłady z perspektywy dziecka w polskiej literaturze dokumentu osobistego*, Wrocław 2009.

³ Cf. B. KWIECIŃSKI, *Obrazy i klisze. Między biegunami wizualnej pamięci Zagłady*, Kraków 2012.

⁴ Cf. S. BURYŁA, *Tematy (nie)opisane*, Kraków 2013; M. CUBER, *Metonimie Zagłady. O polskiej prozie lat 1987-2012*, Katowice 2013; P. CZAPLIŃSKI, *Odzyskiwanie Zagłady*, in «Przegląd Polityczny», 61, 2003; IDEM, *Zagłada jak wyzwanie dla refleksji o literaturze*, in «Teksty Drugie», 5, 2004; B. KRUPA, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę. Polska proza i historiografia wobec Holokaustu (1987-2003)*, Kraków 2013; *Memory of the Shoah. Contemporary representations*, ed. by A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Warszawa 2003; G. NIZOLEK, *Polski teatr Zagłady*, Warszawa 2013; *Stosowność i forma. Jak opowiadać o Zagładzie?*, ed. by K. Chmielewska, M. Głowiński, K. Makurak, A. Molisak, T. Żukowski, Kraków 2006; A. UBERTOWSKA, *Świadectwo – trauma – głos. Literackie reprezentacje Holokaustu*, Kraków 2007; *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania*, ed. by E. Romańska, P. Czapliński, Poznań 2009; M. ZALESKI, *Formy pamięci. O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej*, Warszawa 1996.

⁵ Cf. S. BURYŁA, *Opisać Zagładę. Holocaust w twórczości Henryka Grynberga*, Wrocław 2006; IDEM, *Wokół Zagłady. Szkice o literaturze Holokaustu*, Kraków 2016; D. KRAWCZYŃSKA, *Własna historia Holokaustu. O pisarstwie Henryka Grynberga*, Łódź 2005; A. MOLISAK, *Judaizm jako los. Rzecz o Bogdanie Wojdowskim*, Warszawa 2004; A. MORAWIEC, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze. Fakt, temat, metafora*, Łódź 2009; IDEM, *Polityczne, prywatne, metafizyczne. Szkice o literaturze polskiej ostatnich dziesięcioleci*, Toruń 2014; A. UBERTOWSKA, *Holokaust. Auto(tanato)grafie*, Warszawa 2014; S.J. ŻUREK, *Synowie księżycy. Zapisy poetyckie Aleksandra Wata i Henryka Grynberga w świetle tradycji i teologii żydowskiej*, Lublin 2004.

⁶ Cf. M. BERNACKI, *O trylogii powieściowej Piotra Szewca. Jak możliwa jest kontemplacja świata po „Zagładzie”*, in «Przegląd Powszechny», 5, 2007, pp. 124-134; K. BOJARSKA, *Historia Zagłady i literatura (nie)piękna. „Tworci” Marka Bieńczyka w kontekście kultury posttraumatycznej*, in «Pamiętnik Literacki», 2, 2008, pp. 89-106; EADEM, *Czas na realizm – (post)traumatyczny*, in «Teksty Drugie», 4, 2012, pp. 8-14; P. CZAPLIŃSKI, *Zagłada i profanacje*, in «Teksty Drugie», 4 (118),

Following suggestions offered by the works mentioned, I will analyse some of the most important new texts introducing the theme of the Holocaust.

The list of recent fiction on the Shoah published in Polish after 1989 is very long. It could start with the volumes of Henryk Grynberg's prose, which reappeared in Poland after the years of silence that followed the author's exile in 1967⁷. Bogdan Wojdowski and Hanna Krall also wrote about the Holocaust in the early 1990s. One of the first younger authors, born already after World War II, to take up this matter was Paweł Huelle (born in 1957). He broke the silence surrounding the Shoah with his now legendary novel – *Weiser Dawidek* (1987). In the 1990s the stream of narrative texts really flooded the editorial market. Many of them dealt with the Holocaust and it is impossible to present them all. Thus, in this article, I would like to focus on the major trends of contemporary fiction, which have not diminished over the last few years.

For instance, just after the year 2000, several key prose works were published. Their authors belong to the generation known as the Children of the Holocaust⁸. They seldom use fictional elements, concentrating rather on non-fiction. The most important examples are: *Magdalenka z razowego chleba* [The Cake of Whole-Wheat Bread, 2001] by Michał Głowiński (a renowned Polish literary scholar who "came out" as a Jew in 1999, publishing his autobiographical volume *Czarne sezony* [The Black Seasons], in which he wrote about his experience as a Jewish boy hiding on the so-called "Aryan side"); *Lekcja angielskiego* [English Lesson, 2010] by Wilhelm Dichter and also his earlier prose: *Koń Pana Boga* [The Horse of the Lord, 1996] and *Szkoła bezbożników* [The School of the Godless, 1999]; and *Księżyc nad Taorminą* [The Moon over Taormina, 2011] by Roma Ligocka, who is also the author of several other important books, most of which are connected with the theme of the Shoah⁹.

The children's novel *Szlemiel* (the name of a dog, 2010), by Ryszard Marek Groński (born 1939) stands out sharply against this background. Groński's work is an example of an incipient trend of fictional tell-tales about the Shoah which appear in Polish popular literature for children

2009, pp. 199-213; O. DANEK, „Trzecie oko” Wilhelma Dichtera, in «Cwiszn», 4, 2010, pp. 112-113; K. DZIKA-JUREK, „Setka szarych pali” – (nie)świadomość Zagłady w powieści „Skaza” Magdaleny Tulli, in «Teksty Drugie», 5 (143), 2013, pp. 25-41; M. FUZOWSKI, *Pogodzenie*, in «Twórczość», 2, 2009, pp. 109-110; P. HUELLE, *Jakubowa drabina*, in «Zeszyty Literackie», 4, 2009, pp. 193-196; M. JENTYS, *Żywioly buntu. O twórczości Mariusza Sieniewicza*, in «Twórczość», 3, 2008, pp. 79-90; J. KOWALSKA-LEDER, *Literatura polska ostatniego dziesięciolecia wobec Zagłady – próby odpowiedzi na nowe wyzwania*, in «Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały», 10/1, 2014, pp. 768-802; D. KRAWCZYŃSKA, *Empatia? Substytucja? Identyfikacja?: jak czytać teksty o Zagładzie?*, in «Teksty Drugie», 5 (89), 2004, pp. 179-189; A. MORAWIEC, *Holokaust i postmodernizm. O „Tworach” Marka Bieńczyka*, in «Ruch Literacki», 2, 2005, pp. 193-209; M. OLSZEWSKI, *W gabinecie figur woskowych*, in «Akcent», 4, 2010, pp. 113-116; E. RYCZOWSKA, *Szochen tow*, in «Akcent», 4, 2008, pp. 117-120; M. SAWA, *Zamojszczyzna w opowiadaniach wspomnieniowych Michała Głowińskiego*, in: *Żydzi w Zamościu i na Zamojszczyźnie. Historia – kultura – literatura*, ed. W. Litwin, M. Szablowska-Zaremba, S.J. Żurek, Lublin 2012, pp. 205-215; A. UBERTOWSKA, *Krzepiąca moc kiczu. Literatura Holocaustu na (estetycznych) manowcach*, in «Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały», 6, 2010, pp. 23-40; T. ŻUKOWSKI, *Świadkowie Zagłady*, in «Teksty Drugie», 5 (70), 2001, pp. 139-145; IDEM, *Antysemityzm jako modyfikator znaczeń*, in «Teksty Drugie», 1-2 (73-74), 2002, pp. 254-258.

⁷ Cf. S. BURYŁA, *Opisać Zagładę*, cit.; D. KRAWCZYŃSKA, *Własna historia*, cit.; S.J. ŻUREK, *op. cit.*

⁸ Of course, many of them were very active in literature also before 1989. Cf. *Literatura Polska wobec Zagłady (1939-1968)*, ed. by S. Buryła, D. Krawczyńska, J. Leociak, Warszawa 2013.

⁹ Cf. R. LIGOCKA, *Dziewczynka w czerwonym płaszczyku* [The Girl in Red Coat] (2001), *Kobieta w podróży* [The Woman on the Way] (2002), *Tylko ja sama* [Only Me Myself] (2005), *Znajoma z lustra* [An Acquaintance from the Mirror] (2006), *Wszystko z miłości* [Everything Out of Love] (2007), *Czułość i obojętność* [Affection and Indifference] (2009), *Róża* [Rose] (2010), *Księżyc nad Taorminą* [Moon over Taormina] (2011), *Dobre dziecko* [Good Child] (2012), *Wolna miłość* [Free Love] (2013), *Droga Romo* [Dear Roma] (2014).

and young adults. Similarly, a pop-culture novel *Pingpongista* [The Ping-Pong Player, 2008] by Józef Hen is an attempt to come to terms with the matter of Jedwabne (the burning of Jewish inhabitants of a village by their Polish neighbours in July 1941) and a gesture of shifting this very important social discourse into the literary language of contemporary mass-readers.

In what follows we will be interested only in the most recent Polish fiction (published by the authors belonging to the second and third generation after the Holocaust), and exemplified by the novels by Marek Bieńczyk (born in 1956) – *Tworki* (Tworki is the name of a big psychiatric hospital; 1999); Piotr Szewc (born in 1961) – and his series of books *Zagłada* [Annihilation, 1987], *Zmierzchy i poranki* [Evenings and Mornings, 2001] and *Bociany nad powiatem* [Storks over the District, 2005]; Igor Ostachowicz (born in 1968) – *Noc żywych Żydów* [The Night of the Living Jews, 2012]; Mariusz Sieniewicz (born in 1972) – *Żydówek nie obsługujemy* [We Don't Serve Jewesses, 2006]; and Piotr Paziński (born in 1973) – *Pensjonat* [The Boarding House, 2009]. My analysis uses four categories which structure both the world represented and the form of the novels: transgression, pop-culture, history and metonymy. This typology will – I hope – serve readers as a sort of a guide into the complexities of representing the Shoah in contemporary Polish fiction.

Transgression

The first category, which covers the way the world presented in the novels about the Shoah is organised, is transgression. You can see it first of all in the collection of short stories *Żydówek nie obsługujemy* by Mariusz Sieniewicz¹⁰ whose plot is set in a contemporary supermarket, where the Shoah is still ongoing and where the same laws enforced in the Nazi world are still observed. Transgression – understood as the deliberate crossing of existing social, symbolic and material boundaries¹¹ – informs not only the construction of the represented world, but also the characters, their dialogues and the use of language. Transgression can also be seen in the novel by Igor Ostachowicz. In his *Noc żywych Żydów* the main character lives in the present-day Muranów district of Warsaw – the quarter that enclosed Europe's largest ghetto during the Second World War¹². One day the protagonist, Glazurnik, (whose nickname reflecting his profession can be translated into English as “a tiler”) discovers the entrance to a closed Jewish district in Warsaw (as the Germans used to call the ghetto) in his cellar. As a result of different adventures, the Jewish characters (Jewish Zombies) living below the foundations of the building move into contemporary Warsaw. First they come into contact with the present-day inhabitants of this district, who do not belong to high society and in many cases are very anti-Semitic. The language of the novel is vulgar, obscene and brutal. Its main events and characters are grotesque, larger-than-life and improbable. Thus, the aesthetic effect of this novel is ambivalent and far from pleasant – despite its undeniable

¹⁰ Mariusz Sieniewicz is the author of the following novels: *Prababka* [A Great-Grandmother] (1999), *Czwarte niebo* [The Fourth Heaven] (2003), *Żydówek nie obsługujemy* [We Don't Serve Jewesses] (2005), *Rebelia* [Insurgency] (2007), *Miasto szklanych słoni* [The Town of Glass Elephants] (2010), *Spowiedź Śpiącej Królowej* [The Confession of Sleeping Beauty] (2012).

¹¹ Cf. J. KOZIELECKI, *Transgresja i kultura*, Warszawa 1997; B. GRODZKI, *Tradycja i transgresja. Od dyskursu do autokreacji w eseistyce i „formach pojemnych” Czesława Miłosza*, Lublin 2002; B. BOGOŁĘNSKA, *Od tradycji do nowatorstwa, od transgresji do adaptacji na wybranych przykładach literackich i publicystycznych*, Łódź 2013; *Transgresja w kulturze*, ed. by T. Paleczny, J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, Kraków 2014.

¹² See: B. ENGELKING, J. LEOCIAK, *The Warsaw ghetto. A guide to the perished city*, New Haven 2009; J. LEOCIAK, *Tekst wobec Zagłady. O relacjach z getta warszawskiego*, Wrocław 1997.

humour, the text highlights disturbing and serious truths about both contemporary characters and those dating back to the time of the Shoah, about both our and their worlds.

Recent prose makes use of various kinds of transgression. It is clear that both Sieniewicz and Ostachowicz write about the Holocaust in a postmodernist way – they use cultural categories mixing them with religious language referring to Judaism and Christianity. In the case of Ostachowicz, whose protagonist is following a mysterious light, the motif of the Last Judgment appears, while the main character visits Auschwitz like Christ descending into Hell or the figure of the devil which embodies the Nazis. Religious echoes also reverberate in the last chapter of the novel, which may be interpreted as introducing eschatological issues – in this part, the reader is exposed to the ominous silence in the narrative and an overwhelming atmosphere of dignity. The main character in this part of the novel is the Cleaner, who brings peace and leads Glazurnik (“the Tiler”) to a new life. Looking for a key to help us understand the *Żydówek nie obsługujemy* story, we can turn to concepts familiar to the Jewish world, where transgression plays a very important role. One of the possible interpretations may link the presence of the Jewish context in the novel to the tradition of Judaism and the Jewish feast of Purim. This religious holiday unites two orders: transgression and religion, allowing orthodox Jews to breach all the principles that they normally observe closely every day. For instance, during Purim, orthodox Jews can take part in theatrical performances, men can dress as women and vice versa. Gambling games are permitted and so are all entertainments. The Hasidim traditionally drink themselves into a stupor on this occasion.

Sieniewicz and Ostachowicz cross all kinds of boundaries, leading to the final breakdown of the worlds presented. Characters start to deliver senseless dialogues and the texts create a reality which is completely devoid of sense. In some of these transgressions, as in the Purim feast, the convention of the grotesque dominates, expressed in a kind of carnivalisation and clowning – the narrator presents serious events (the annihilation of all nations) using a comic convention. One of the possible explanations for the humour may be the fact that all these conventions are haunted by the sense that everything that takes place within the world of the text (even the execution of a Jewish woman in a supermarket) is a computer game keeping up an imaginary convention and is only momentary. Transgression does not operate solely in terms of the fictional narrative but also in terms of the aesthetics, ethics and ontology. It shows how contemporary people perceive reality and history – as if they were only a game or a dream.

Pop-culture

The second category identified in the novels in question is pop-culture. The worlds represented: *Noc żywych Żydów* and *Żydówek nie obsługujemy* are deeply embedded in the conventions of horror, cult movies about Zombies and the poetics of the macabre, which is very popular in mass culture. The Holocaust arouses emotions and, just as in classic literary works of pop-culture, all these devices are not simply art for art’s sake.

Ostachowicz deliberately uses pop-cultural conventions, thus turning life into a farce. He shows how all spaces and spheres of life have been commercialized, a fact emphatically underlined by the corpses. He points to certain negative consequences of modernity, which led, among other things, to the annihilation of the Jews in Poland and still destroy human beings and their interpersonal relationships today. Then – following Zygmunt Bauman’s train of thought – the reader realizes that the author’s main aim is to draw attention to the fact that even seventy years

after the Holocaust, we are still living in the rationale of the Shoah¹³. This rationale is manifested no longer in the industrial killing of people but in the industrialisation of human life which makes it completely shallow. The main character of the story, a conformist tiler-, suddenly becomes aware of the vanity of human existence as society becomes submerged in consumerism and apathy, which crush values such as compassion and solidarity. The tiler manages to change his attitude and his life, although he does so reluctantly, only after learning about the fate of the dead Jews and when he himself, in a quasi-fantastic twist in the plot, is exposed to a sample of their hellish suffering in Auschwitz. He begins to notice good and evil and to act according to his conscience. In this way, – in spite of the creation of a broken world – the novel surprisingly manages to attain an ethical dimension. The pop-culture convention of horror-cum-black comedy appears to be used as a way of transfixing the readers and raising their awareness. Ostachowicz satirises pop-cultural conventions because they trivialise evil, death, its memory and all that is most important and most valuable in human life. The effect is, of course, stupefying – mainly, perhaps, in the way he juxtaposes the dead children of the Holocaust with the world of modern gadgetry and the lifestyles of contemporary teenagers.

Writing about the Shoah using the pop-cultural conventions of modern literature certainly appears to help reach a wide circle of recipients – mass-readers. So what new peculiarities and narrative strategies do these young writers representing the Shoah in contemporary Polish fiction introduce? The novelty of their texts does not rely on any unusual psychological depth in their characters or on any kind of mission designed to enlighten their readers. Rather these works seem to emphasise that we still need to talk about the influence of the Holocaust on human social and cultural behaviour, about how an individual could be intimidated, how his or her otherness could be destroyed¹⁴, how people were hierarchised and divided. Yet, the authors are fully aware that it is necessary to do so in a modern, culturally attuned way. The novelists, therefore, consciously use the conventions of the grotesque as well as deep provocation, widespread in popular culture, and the young generations of readers seem to love it, judging by the wide circulation and popularity of these works.

History

In this analysis of contemporary Polish fiction about the Shoah, the third key category is history and how it is now perceived¹⁵. Ostachowicz diagnoses contemporary reality, which appears to be a palimpsest of various pasts. New lives have been built in Poland on the bones and wreckage of its former inhabitants, never mourned by anybody. In his novel, history, first of all the most difficult history of Polish-Jewish relationships¹⁶, moves into the present and intertwines with the lives of people born twenty, thirty and even forty years after the Shoah. This novel raises awareness of the history that is apparent in everyday items and that we know absolutely nothing

¹³ Cf. Z. BAUMAN, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca (N.Y.) 1989; IDEM, *Postmodernity and its discontents*, New York 1999.

¹⁴ See: A. FIUT, *Spotkania z Innym*, Kraków 2006.

¹⁵ This perception is very individual. See: B. ENGELKING, *Holocaust and memory. The experience of the Holocaust and its consequences. An investigation based on personal narratives*, London 2001.

¹⁶ Cf. F. TYCH, *Długi cień Zagłady. Szkice historyczne*, Warszawa 1999; J.T. GROSS, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*, Sejny 2000; *Tam był kiedyś mój dom... Księgi pamięci gmin żydowskich*, ed. by M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, A. Kopciowski, A. Trzcziński, Lublin 2009; M. COBEL-TOKARSKA, *Bezludna wyspa, nora grób. Wojenne kryjówki Żydów w okupowanej Polsce*, Warszawa 2012; R. KUWAŁEK, *Zagłada sztetl. Żydzi w Izbycu pod okupacją nazistowską*, in: *Żydzi w Zamościu*, cit., pp. 255-277.

about. Thus conceptualised by Ostachowicz or Sieniewicz, the Shoah is cut out of its historical context. It is still taking place; it is something present and alive for modern people. The Holocaust has an impact on people, even on those who have no awareness and no sensibility or historical knowledge:

[...] evil can't be covered by wreckage or dust, suffering must be respected and appraised, and blood, if it is not swept up in time and just allowed to sink indifferently into the ground, will – combined with clay – come to light together with a horde of golems [...]; they will be glued together by the power of sub-biology forming two-footed nightmares knowing only pain, and they will share this pain with us, running crunched from door to door of our calm homes¹⁷.

In Warsaw after the Second World War the Jews were indeed covered by subsequent layers of earth, rubble and concrete. They did not disappear; they – paradoxically – lived on in isolation, without being mourned. At last in the represented world of Ostachowicz's prose, on an impulse, Jews start to come up to the surface. They want to be noticed and to have access to their lost world. Symbolically changed directions are very characteristic in this novel. In the text, these are not living people that come down to the world of the dead (which could be interpreted as an allegory of the contemplation of the past), but the dead that rise up to the world of the living. This situation shows not only the inability of the living to accept the history of the Jewish persecution but, more damagingly, their aversion to their tragedy.

The writer's gesture reflects the struggle of contemporary Polish fiction for the memory of the murdered Jewish people. Of course, you could say that it is a utopian struggle. But, on the other hand, you could equally point out that it is an act of mercy – not towards dead Jews, but towards live Poles. Ostachowicz wants his readers to shake off their lethargy – their lack of respect and atonement for Jewish suffering. He has probably found the only effective language able to force the contemporary generation to really reflect on the evil that took place in Poland. This language is grotesque, brutal and horrible, but only in this way can readers experience a refreshing return to health.

From an eschatological point of view, the Jews of Ostachowicz's novel cannot achieve everlasting life, because they have not experienced the love and mercy of their non-Jewish neighbours. Many Poles failed to see Jews as human beings. This was the effect of Nazi propaganda – but not only. According to the Talmud, man is still alive as long as somebody takes care of him. Memory or, more precisely, post-memory – as none of the characters in the novel actually witnessed the Shoah – becomes the superior value, for which one must fight. The main character of *Noc żywych Żydów* undertakes this kind of struggle, the struggle for memory. In the great "Arcadia" shopping mall, in a contemporary commercial temple built on the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto, once the site of the murder of countless Jewish people, Jews come in to play with modern people and achieve their goal. They start to fight together against historical amnesia and thoughtless consumerism. It is a true revolt.

Another important category connected with the representation of history is the "empty place". A Polish contemporary writer, Piotr Paziński, is the author of the novel *Pensjonat*. In essence, the novel is precisely a historical treatise about an empty place. This empty place is, of course, Poland after the Holocaust. Likewise, in the collection *Żydówek nie obsługujemy*, the

¹⁷ I. OSTACHOWICZ, *Noc żywych Żydów*, Warszawa 2012, p. 14.

empty place is a key category. In these narratives empty places are breaks in the story line (two- or three-page pauses which divide longer parts of stories). All of them – there are five – try to answer the question of the identity of the eponymous female Jewesses that appear in the novel. The clues suggest a young woman, an officer, a Moomin and a dog. It is impossible to find a common denominator for these senseless options. Sieniewicz seems to be trying to show that in contemporary Poland the word “Jew” is only an empty place, a sinister language sign, without any given historical sense. After the Second World War there were many empty places in Poland – and many empty words such as “Jew” or “Jewish”. These words used to define people and items which no longer exist because they were annihilated in the majesty of the law. In popular mentality they were punished, and so they had had to be guilty. But their guilt was merely their Jewish blood, nothing else. That is why the words “Jew” or “Jewish” in contemporary Polish are still negative categories; likewise – as contemporary literature stresses – they are so in the Poles’ collective memory and post-memory.

Where do the visions of the Shoah, as reflected in the texts written by the post-Holocaust generations of writers, come from? They are cultural artefacts, images formed and transmitted by culture and its conventions rather than by genuine personal memory, impossible in the case of the second and third post-Shoah generation. One can see it especially in last story of the collection *Żydówek nie obsługujemy* by Sieniewicz. The supermarket, which is an enclosed area of consumerism, seems to be a ghetto or a concentration camp. Each customer has a card with their own assigned number. The main character is a Jewish woman whom nobody wants to serve because it is not clear if she is alive. If she wants to be served she must lose her identity, she must become another person. She decides to stay her Jewish self – and that means death. She is executed – paradoxically – in a consumerist way: pelted with bread.

Sieniewicz describes the supermarket almost as if it were an enclosed space under Nazi orders:

Behind the rubbish dump you stop for a moment to give the supermarket a farewell look. In the doorways bonfires are burning, the Gestapo division has completely cordoned off the area; dogs are barking fiercely, saliva leaking from their muzzles. Bodyguards are beating their hands together; they are standing at the trucks, staring bleakly at the captives being rounded up. One important Fritz is explaining something to an even more important Fritz, maybe to captain Schitke. Gestapo officers are catching the surviving customers; confiscating their goods, cash and jewellery. They are packing part of the people into trucks while the others are made to stand against the wall! “Hände hoch! Hände hoch! Raus, hipermarktisheschweine!”, an officer shouts through the megaphone, maybe Citke. With their hands raised and without even the slightest protest, people are letting the Gestapo place black bands over their eyes. Black! Not yellow, not Jewish – wide death-rags. “Feuer! Feuer!” –machine-gunfire mows people down like flowers. Crows fly up into the sky¹⁸.

It is as if this picture came from a popular TV war-series. This fragment of a description of the hypermarket is full of elements characteristic of the memories or witness accounts of Nazi crimes, but at the same time it links us to the modern world and its popular culture.

¹⁸ M. SIENIEWICZ, *Żydówek nie obsługujemy*, Warszawa 2005, p. 236.

Metonymy

In conclusion, the last of the four categories analysed here, which may be said to organise contemporary Polish fiction of the Shoah, is metonymy. One can see this category first of all in the works of Piotr Szewc and Marek Bieńczyk. The former uses the setting of the interwar city of Zamość as a canvas for his story. The latter sets the action of his novel in a psychiatric hospital near Warsaw during the time of the Holocaust. In both cases the narrator and characters do not refer directly to the Shoah, although Bieńczyk depicts Warsaw and its surroundings during the Second World War, which can potentially suggest connotations with the Shoah. Szewc points to the Holocaust via a system of allusions which pulse through the narrative:

The flowers enriched the world with their heady scents and colours, but behind the overblown lilac bush, behind Icchak Safian's hovel, behind the stairs of the city hall and in the gate of the house at the Salt Market – stood Nothingness. It showed its expressionless face and hunting for wagtails and cocks, goats, roe-deer, dogs and calves; it searched for geraniums in windows, and peonies and lupines in the gardens¹⁹.

The novel uses an original narrative device: to explain the sense of the future, it focuses on the past. In the Arcadian area of the pre-war Polish-Jewish Zamość there appear some eschatological signs. They appear and slowly build a compelling impression of the forthcoming end of this mythical space. It is literally the end of summer, but symbolically it suggests the approaching cataclysm. This catastrophe was, of course, the war and accompanying it the annihilation of the Jews. Novels by Piotr Szewc represent the Shoah of the Jewish Zamość, and as a result, the irreparable dissolution of the Polish-Jewish world.²⁰ When interpreting these novels the metonymy category, introduced into literary studies in the context of the Shoah by Marta Cuber-Tomczok²¹, can be helpful. Szewc uses metonymy perfectly. He contemplates a particular moment in time, which in a second will pass away. In a paradoxical gesture, on the one hand the author saves the Polish-Jewish world, but on the other, he annihilates it. The same situation takes place in Paziński's story, in which the author invites his readers to the land of Nothingness. This land is a metonymically created vacuum, in which the narrator begins his very secret narration without a story line, as in the book of Genesis. He says: "Na początku były tory kolejowe" ("In the beginning there were railway tracks" – yet, the word "tory", which in Polish, of course, means "railway tracks"; he also elicits an involuntary association with the plural form of the noun Torah – in Polish "Tory"). The Jews were transported to gas chambers precisely by "tory" (railway tracks). This is the beginning of a new mythology and a new world – of "Poland without Jews". Moreover, "In the beginning" are also the first words of Torah – in Hebrew "Bereshit".

¹⁹ P. SZEWC, *Bociany nad powiatem*, Kraków 2005, p. 95.

²⁰ The Polish-Jewish world is first of all a cultural and literary category. Cf. W. PANAS, *The Writing and Wound. On Polish-Jewish Literature*, trans. Ch. Garbowski, in: *Jewish Writing in Poland*, «Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry», vol. 28, ed. by M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, E. Prokop-Janiec, A. Polonsky, S.J. Żurek, Oxford - Portland 2016, pp. 17-30.

²¹ Cf. M. CUBER, *op. cit.*

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The four categories of transgression, pop-culture, history and metonymy have a completely different provenance. The first two come from aesthetics, the third one from historical discourse, and the last from literary studies. All of them, however, are useful when interpreting the world of contemporary Polish fiction about the Shoah. To be sure, awareness of the Holocaust in the case of all the writers discussed here is mediated; they strongly build on artefacts and archival sources rather than on their own experiences. Yet, as you can see, they try to understand the meaning of the Shoah and give it a new artistic shape.

Abstract

SŁAWOMIR JACEK ŻUREK

The Shoah in Contemporary Polish Fiction (after 1989)

This article takes a look at contemporary Polish prose dealing with theme of the Shoah. "Contemporary", in this case, means fiction published in the 1990s and after the year 2000, thus already in the twenty-first century. It therefore comprises the last twenty-five years. The fundamental categories used here in the analyses of texts, are the memory and post-memory of the Shoah. The authors who have published works over the last twenty five years have either been witnesses of these events (i.e. Children of the Holocaust), or – more often – representatives of the second or third generation after the Shoah. In this article, contemporary Polish fiction will be exemplified by the prose of Marek Bieńczyk, Piotr Szewc, Igor Ostachowicz, Mariusz Sieniewicz and Piotr Paziński. Analysis contains four categories which structure both the world represented and the form of the prose: transgression, pop-culture, history and metonymy.

Keywords: Contemporary Polish prose, Shoah, Transgression, Pop-culture, History, Metonymy, Memory, Post-memory

«pl.it / rassegna italiana di argomenti polacchi», (VII) 7, 2016, pp. 187-195