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# The intelligentsia and the Holocaust

## Dispersing the image

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**Abstract:** This paper in the field of cultural memory studies addresses the workings of memory, or more precisely – a politics of memory whereby the image of the intelligentsia and its role in the Holocaust vanishes from the collective consciousness. The relative visibility of peasants denouncing Jews, murdering them and plundering their property is accompanied by an invisibility of the intelligentsia and its essential role in reinforcing the exclusion and the antisemitic patterns of behavior before the Holocaust which facilitated direct involvement in these events, as well as an invisibility of the intelligentsia's own participation in the events of the Holocaust.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; politics of memory; intelligentsia

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This article is an attempt to demonstrate the mechanisms of collective memory, whereby images of the past are transferred, shifted and dispersed. Although quite frequent, this phenomenon is insufficiently recognized and analyzed, even though it is of utmost significance in shaping collective identity. It acquires a special status as the social role of memory itself gains in importance, particularly when different communities and entire societies declare themselves to be communities of memory.<sup>1</sup> It would be erroneous to examine these mechanisms in terms of the “natural” or “intrinsic” transformations of memory, which dissipates and shrinks with time. The changes, shifts and dispersions in the image of the past are the product of active or reactive forces which take advantage of differences in cultural and symbolic capitals<sup>2</sup> to make shifts in the field of the past as well as in that of the present.

The above practices bring us closer to the concept of the politics of memory, which I define as a general framework shaping discourses about the past, as well as the content and even the subjects of memory.<sup>3</sup> The goal and object of a politics of memory invariably concerns a community and its status. The politics of memory provides a field for the games, identities, conflicts and cultural constellations which envelop the allegedly neutral past. It seeks to produce a homogenous and allegorical tale, with clearly designated roles and heroes who display strong ethical attitudes (Chmielewska, 2018).

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1 I adopt the category of cultural memory following Aleida Assmann (cf. A. Assmann, 2007; François, Kończal, Traba, & Troebst, 2013). The concept of politics of memory and that of historical policy are independently defined in this and other texts I authored, referred to below.

2 I adopt the definition of this concept after Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984).

3 For more on my understanding of the politics of memory and historical policy see Calderón Puerta & Chmielewska, 2017.

It provides foundations for the order of memories and a framework for what can and should appear, as well as for the manner in which it appears in them; it defines taboos and pragmatizes the narrative about the past. A politics of memory is supposed to create or strengthen a community, to exclude from or confirm collective belonging, unite the contemporary voices into a homophony, delegitimizing some and legitimizing others.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike in the case of historical policy,<sup>5</sup> politics of memory can be cultivated by a group with blurred and imprecise boundaries, and not necessarily by a consolidated institution or a group of related institutions. My goal in this paper is to present a collective subject (the intelligentsia) and its politics of memory. The intelligentsia is a specific subject which cannot be identified with political authorities. Nevertheless, its symbolic advantage and the institutional and non-institutional means it has at its disposal allow it to shape the narrative about the past, shift emphasis, or – most interestingly to me – ignore its own role in the complicated historical process.

This paper addresses a specific form of denial; it must be clearly emphasized that, in this case, the denial has nothing to do with trauma, nor with the psychoanalytical toolkit of terms and concepts.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it refers to the symbolic capital which allows to render the events in the past visible (or not), to make images fade, blur them, or transform them into obvious but hardly recognizable phantoms that form no coherent whole.

This succinct presentation attempts to outline the discourse on the role of the Polish intelligentsia during the Holocaust and the image of peasant involvement in the Shoah, which is partly related to this discourse. **The relative visibility<sup>7</sup> of peasants denouncing Jews, murdering them and plundering their property<sup>8</sup> is accompanied by an invisibility of the intelligentsia and its essential role in reproducing the exclusion and the antisemitic patterns of behavior before the Holocaust which facilitated society's involvement, including the intelligentsia's direct participation, in the events of the Holocaust.** I refer to texts of culture such as diaries, memoirs, literature, films, journalistic and academic texts

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4 For more on my understanding of historical policy cf. Chmielewska, 2013.

5 For more on the differences between these categories and their relation to the concept by Aleida Assmann cf. Chmielewska, 2018.

6 Of course, "denial" is an accepted psychoanalytical term which refers to the concept of trauma. I tend to use it in a more colloquial sense, however, and understand denial as removing something from consciousness and sight, not because it is related to trauma, but as a political move.

7 The recognition of Poles', especially peasants', involvement in the Holocaust on a societal scale is a relatively new phenomenon which is strongly rejected and partly or totally opposed by some. It is continuously neutralized by the dominant discourse on "the cursed soldiers," "the Polish Righteous" and "Polish sacrifice" during the war. Disclosing this element of the Polish experience of the war demanded enormous effort and courage from authors addressing this issue. They had to overcome resistance from large groups in society, including professional historians. They were frequently accused of exaggeration, lies, distorting or bending facts, and overemphasis, all allegedly in order to tarnish the good name of Poles and Poland. Their standpoint is sometimes rejected even today. The events related to the amendment of the Act on the National Institute of Remembrance in 2018 show emphatically that this knowledge has not been generally and unconditionally consolidated in the Polish consciousness and continues to be rejected. That is why I use the term "relative visibility." More on this topic further on in this text.

8 I refer primarily to the studies of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research: Engelking & Grabowski, 2011; Engelking, 2011, 2012; Grabowski, 2012, 2013. The book *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross (Gross, 2001a) also needs to be mentioned in this context.

(in the field of professional history). I am thus analyzing the area of cultural memory, and in particular, the processes which occur in this area.<sup>9</sup>

## Prelude

Let us go back to the beginning, to the facts which seem to escape modern consciousness despite the fact that we are familiar with them (cf. Cota, 2018, especially Ch. 7: *Antisemitism in independent Poland*). In 1923, legislative proposals were initiated in Poland aiming to restrict the right of Jews to attend university, following the example of Hungary (1920); laws of this kind were also passed in Romania (1926) (cf. Chojnowski, 1979; Garlicki, 1989). This process was eventually completed in 1937, when the principle of limiting the number of Jewish students (*numerus clausus*) began to operate in Polish academia, albeit demands to exclude Jews from universities altogether (*numerus nullus*) persisted. The intention was not only to prevent Jews from achieving a high social status in the near future, but also to prevent their social reproduction, thereby excluding them from the intelligentsia.<sup>10</sup> Of course, these are neither the only nor the most blatant examples of growing antisemitism, which was a feature of inter-war Poland from beginning to end (Heller Stopnicka, 1977). I merely emphasize those examples which pertain to the intelligentsia and its foundations – the university. Antisemitism as a social practice (Mich, 1994), and then as a policy of the state (Brykczynski, 2016), was demonstrated by the everyday behavior of all social groups: peasants, workers, the bourgeoisie, the gentry and the clergy; it was a staple matter in culture, art, education, religion and business (Zieliński & Kijek, 2016). The modern antisemitism of the National Democrats (Grott, 1991) was combined with the traditional anti-Judaism of the Christian Churches (Porter-Schucs, 2003); the role of the Catholic Church and Catholic press, which were strongly committed to the dissemination of antisemitism and reinforcing antisemitic imagery as an important social “glue” and the foundation of social activity, seems indisputable.<sup>11</sup>

Let us review familiar elements of the history of the intelligentsia: in the 1930s, attending Polish universities meant ghetto benches for Jews as well as battery, harassment, abuse, and terror towards Jewish students and all those opposing the segregation and exclusion. The young Polish intelligentsia and faculty members effectively reduced the numbers of Jewish students. Maria Dąbrowska wrote about this in her frequently cited text from 1936 *Doroczny wstyd (Annual shame)* (which was not free from antisemitic

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9 As mentioned above, the concept of cultural memory is adopted after Aleida Assmann (cf. A. Assmann, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; J. Assmann, 1995, 2011; J. Assmann & Hölscher, 1998).

10 This went further, encompassing exclusion from different professional groups, the establishment of “Christian” labor unions, etc.

11 Cf. Domagalska, 2004, p. 36: “The Catholic press joined the National Democratic journalists and stressed the necessity of defending Polish property by promoting Polish business and fighting against the Jews in economic terms. The introduction of political restrictions was also proposed.”

elements itself). Dąbrowska noted that these practices were regular, general and popular; she was outraged by the lack of strong social resistance against them, and by the consent to violence on the part of the whole society, including the elite and the Church.

In nearly all university towns in Poland, the beginning of every academic year brings an outbreak of anti-Jewish excesses, which insult both civilization and the most basic human and civic feelings. [...] any “spontaneity” that consists in persecuting, beating, and injuring helpless people, and destroying public and private property, could – at most – be explained regretfully by the debased cultural level and ignorance of the activists. But such things do not deserve any special treatment and cannot be explained away by any mitigating circumstances when perpetrated by students – the young generation’s intellectual, and thus perhaps also cultural, elite. [...] The priests are guilty because they are passionately concerned about... Spain. Yet they have never used their authority to condemn the brawls and violence perpetrated in the name of Catholicism and the cross. [...] Some in the press are guilty – those who perfidiously pretend to bemoan the most savage abuses, while actually praising them, and who report on student events unfairly, and sometimes, unfortunately, also deceptively. [...] And what can one say about professors throughout Poland? At a moment like this they should have stood by Professor Wolfke with a single voice, expressing their attitude toward denigrating knowledge (Dąbrowska, 2018, pp. 47–49).

Dąbrowska identified the features which are typically overlooked in the present perception of ghetto benches and related phenomena: she showed the range of this phenomenon, its mass character and the social approval with which it was met.

The scale of antisemitism at universities can be exemplified, for instance, by the fact that the academic pilgrimage to Jasna Góra on May 24, 1936, which openly declared its antisemitic agenda, and took place alongside attacks on Jewish stalls, physical assaults on Jewish individuals and the destruction of Jewish property, was attended by two-fifths of all students in Poland, according to historical sources. The extent of student participation shows the extent of support that antisemitism enjoyed among the ranks of the young intelligentsia and faculty members (Domagalska, 2004, pp. 35–36).

The available knowledge about the antisemitism of the pre-war intelligentsia is not properly recognized in modern society. We may be aware of the facts, but they do not form a coherent picture. The development of antisemitism among the pre-war intelligentsia is dealt with in a small number of studies by historians and scholars of cultural studies, who discuss it only in the broader context of analysis of the National Democratic ideology, and the history of the Jews until 1939, and do not go beyond analyzing declarations or direct violence, while failing to account for the overall social practices or to show the scale of the phenomenon and its importance for society. We are still in need of a study that will go beyond the level of detailed research and paint a broader picture of the antisemitism of the intelligentsia before World War II.<sup>12</sup>

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12 Particular recognition should be given to the studies on some parts of this issue: Rudnicki, 1985, 1991; Żyndul, 1992; Janicka, 2012.

As mentioned above, the intelligentsia as a social class is disappearing from the present image of inter-war antisemitism, replaced by National Democratic activists, rowdy youths and aberrant antisemites. Ghetto benches are characteristically transformed in collective memory; one remembers the heroic behavior of several professors, in particular Professor Tadeusz Kotarbiński, who actively opposed ghetto benches, for which he was slapped on the face and verbally abused. What remains in the shadow is the universal exclusion of Jews, including that inflicted by the state, aversion to assimilation and hatred towards traditional Jewish culture (of “chałaciarze,” “kapote-wearers”). Resistance against Jews and antisemitic prejudices were extremely frequent, even among those who were far from sharing National Democratic sentiments. Another very characteristic feature concerns numerous antisemitic remarks, statements and images scattered across autobiographical and journalistic texts penned by those who were never identified, or identified themselves, with antisemitic attitudes; on the contrary, they considered themselves enemies of National Democracy. It suffices to refer to the above-cited text by Maria Dąbrowska, the diaries of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, or even to some journalistic columns written by Antoni Słonimski and the poems by Julian Tuwim.<sup>13</sup> By no means is it my goal to accuse them of antisemitism, it is rather to demonstrate the strength and prevalence of antisemitic discourse and imagination, the extent to which antisemitic codes were treated as neutral and acceptable, and the social standards among the intelligentsia.<sup>14</sup>

By introducing the *numerus clausus* principle, the intelligentsia excluded Jews from its own ranks, produced, reproduced and reinforced antisemitic patterns of culture and social practices, and at the same time avoided the odium that it might have incurred. The *numerus clausus* principle is only a blatant example of more general antisemitic practices. Not to overstate the case, I accept that this did not pertain to all the intelligentsia all the time. One can even speak about an internal conflict within intelligentsia circles on this very issue. Yet this does not change the fact that the antisemitic, violent cultural pattern was legitimate, if not dominant, in the late 1930s, with the intelligentsia playing an essential role in reinforcing it. This suppressed and ignored phenomenon requires further examination.

13 I mention Słonimski and Tuwim to show that the antisemitic lexicon was a part of assimilation or Polonization, or at least of accessing the majority culture, and it was far from infrequent among individuals subjected to antisemitic pressure. In this particular case, I am referring to Słonimski's text, *O drażliwości Żydów* [On the touchiness of Jews] (Słonimski, 1924) and Tuwim's *Bank* (Tuwim, 2008).

14 The scale of this phenomenon and the fact that antisemitism was a component of the Polish assimilation package can easily be seen when analyzing literary texts and memoirs from that period. I was struck by the tale of Stanisław Likiernik, the prototype of Skiernik, a character in Roman Bratny's novel *Kolumbowie rocznik dwudziesty* [Columbuses, born 1920]. Likiernik's father, an officer in the Polish Army, was repeatedly passed over for promotion and the order of Virtuti Militari was withheld from him because of his Jewish origin, even though he considered himself to be Polish. Experiencing how the antisemitic stigma operated on an everyday basis, he was well aware of the complexities of accession to becoming Polish. One story, dating back to the second half of the 1930s, deserves particular attention; Likiernik mentions his father's conversation with a Jewish aunt who complains about ghetto benches and violence at universities. Likiernik quotes his father (whose views he fully shared at the time) who also complains about the methods of this struggle, but replicates the antisemitic cliché of Jews being over-represented in the intelligentsia and universities as a problem which needs to be resolved. In my opinion, this is a clear example of how accession to Polishness involved the replication of antisemitic ideas even in spite of the self-identification of those involved (Wójcik, Marat, & Likiernik, 2014, p. 114).

## The time of the Holocaust. The intelligentsia antisemitism during the war

### A. Words

The findings of Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak (Koźmińska-Frejłak, 2016), Andrzej Friszke (Friszke, 1992), Dariusz Libionka (Libionka, 2006), Jan Tomasz Gross (Gross, 2001b), and Jan Grabowski (cf. Szapiro, 1989) confirm that the wartime underground press did not refrain from antisemitic rhetoric, antisemitic language, and projects to build a Poland without Jews, sometimes resembling in this respect the so-called reptilian press, published in Polish under the auspices of the Nazi occupiers.<sup>15</sup> Even the publications of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) featured antisemitic clichés; the idea of Jewish “subtenancy” and the conviction that there was a “Jewish issue” that needed to be resolved after the war dominated in all groups. In the face of annihilation, antisemitism remained a code of social communication and an important element of forming the identity of Polish society, including the Polish intelligentsia (who were the main authors and readers of the press). Yet the question of the level of consciousness of this very group (which, of course, is bound to have been as diverse as the group itself), of its attitude to the Holocaust, and its behavior during the Holocaust has not become the focus of any historical study that I am aware of, or of any extensive work in the field of the history of culture.

Feliks Tych, who studied the war diaries of Poles and their attitude to the Holocaust, stressed the striking absence of the mass killing of the Jews as a topic (Tych, 1999). Over two-thirds of the randomly selected texts from different regions, circles and social classes that he examined did not record this fact at all. The Holocaust was not in the field of perception of the authors of those diaries, and if it was, it was frequently in an antisemitic context. Tych noted that “the material analyzed does not allow me to state, for instance, that peasants or workers were more involved in rescuing Jews, or showed greater sympathy than the intelligentsia or the gentry, or that it was the other way round” (Tych, 1999, p. 50). This observation did not attract the attention it deserves. The conclusion that the entire Polish society, regardless of class, had the same or similar attitudes to the Holocaust defies the myth that the intelligentsia and gentry distinguished themselves positively in this respect. There are many more examples. Adam Chętnik, an ethnographer, writer, and cultural luminary, was concerned in 1942 about what Poland should do with the remaining Jews after the war (Chętnik, n.d., l. 140). A concentration camp doctor transferred from Auschwitz to Majdanek praised his change of location in the following words: “Leaving Auschwitz for Lublin I was relieved that, working in a Jewish camp, I would not have to keep watching the death of my compatriots” (Christians, 1946, pp. 115–116). Helena Pasiębska, a high-school graduate from Vilnius and member of the Association for Armed Struggle (ZWZ), talked about the victims murdered in Ponary: “For many, many years after the war, the thought kept coming back, like a pang of conscience, of how to pay the debt

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<sup>15</sup> I have written on this subject before, see Chmielewska, 2018.



to the Poles murdered in Ponary. [...] They found themselves in graves with an ethnically alien human mass" (Pasierbska, n.d., l. 42). The language of eliminatory antisemitism did not disappear among the intelligentsia and gentry, as exemplified by Józef Górski, a landowner from Ceranów near Kosowo Lackie, who wrote the following:

[...] Nazism drew the attention of the world to the threat of international Jewry as a source of demoralization across the Aryan environment (Górski, n.d., ll. 270–271).

The Jews were a polyp feeding off our bodies, which we were too indolent to remove. Hitler conducted this surgery. [...] I could not hide satisfaction passing through our townships cleansed of the Jews, and when I could see that their abhorrent squalid hovels with the ever-present stoves no longer spoiled the landscape. When Thurm [a German official] asked me if the Poles saw the liberation from the Jews as a blessing, I replied "Gewiss" – of course – and I am convinced that I was expressing the opinion of the overwhelming majority of my compatriots (Górski, n.d., l. 74).

Such quotes can easily be written off as individual opinions and social aberrations, rather than being representative of the majority and an expression of normal social communication. It is therefore worth listening to Aurelia Wyleżyńska, a Polish writer, publicist, and a popular member of intelligentsia circles, who did not hesitate to help Jews. She stressed that, compared to the period before 1939, antisemitism intensified during the war and transformed into a "definite hatred of Jews." She went on to say that "the aversion to Jews has become so overwhelming that members of the 'highest classes' do not hesitate to use arguments that they would have been ashamed to use in the past" (Wyleżyńska, n.d., ll. 52–53).

So far I have only described opinions, social ideas and the antisemitic wartime discourse. Although I believe that they played an essential role in forming social practices, direct actions need to be described as well. As it turns out, it would be futile to hope that while the antisemitic patterns were legitimized among the pre-war intelligentsia and did not subside during the war at all but rather strengthened (as they did across the whole of the society), they were limited to verbal (discursive) declarations which did not translate into actions. They did.

## B. Practices

Let us begin with inconspicuous actions, such as examining looks in the street and discussions of whether or not this or that child sitting in a cafeteria<sup>16</sup> or riding a street-car<sup>17</sup> is Jewish. This atmosphere is exemplified by the case of Jerzy Jedlicki, during the war a student at the private and highly patriotic school on Sewerynów St. in Warsaw, which ran clandestine history lessons, and where students were encouraged by their teachers to join the underground scouts. Without a doubt this was a patriotic intelligentsia environment. "During the Ghetto Uprising, when the glow was visible over the city and the air smelled of burning, there was a wave of Jewish jokes the girl-scouts from

16 A story of Michał Głowiński from *Black seasons* (Głowiński, 2005).

17 This example is given by Jerzy Jedlicki in an interview given to Anna Bikont in 2014 (Bikont, 2018).

our class brought from home” (Bikont, 2018, p. 11). It was more than just jokes, as was evidenced after Jedlicki was exposed as a Jew with Aryan documents.

The scoutmaster had a talk with me. He told me sternly that Polish scouts had no place for Jews. I was quite a large boy, thirteen years old at the time, and this was the scene: I'm standing in front of him, blubbering and swearing that I am a Pole, a Catholic, as my family has been for generations. [...] He was gracious enough to make a humiliating proposal, which I accepted; I could remain a member of the scouts, but I could not come to scout meetings. He told me to put in order the scout group's library hidden in the attic of one of his deputies; I worked on that over the summer, but I did not return to school in the fall. We were blackmailed. Scoutmaster Michał Wojnicz-Sianożęcki fell fighting in the Warsaw Uprising in the Old Town (Bikont, 2018, p. 11).

This recollection features a number of themes: blackmail right behind the doorstep, being excluded from the scouts by patriotically-minded youths and by adults active in the underground movement. This exclusion enacted right in the middle of the Holocaust is a meaningful example of the everyday, seemingly not dramatic practices of the intelligentsia. The transition from Jedlicki's exclusion to blackmail was smooth and far from exceptional.

Blackmailing and denouncing Jews (*szmalcownictwo*) is clearly the most poignant example of antisemitic practice. It has also been subjected to a peculiar symbolic “processing.” Starting right in the 1940s, Polish culture has repeatedly featured the image of a Volksdeutscher, or a primitive, unlearned peasant, of neighbors settling their accounts, or a pre-war criminal persecuting Jews; in short, a picture of social margins. Examples are abundant: movies such as *Wielki Tydzień* (*Holy Week*) (1995, dir. Andrzej Wajda), *Pianista* (*The Pianist*) (2002, dir. Roman Polański), and more recently *Ida* (2013, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski).

Yet the book “*Ja tego Żyda znam!*” [“I know this Jew!”] by Jan Grabowski (2004) shows blackmailing Jews as a social practice that **transcends class** and is exercised by the intelligentsia as well.<sup>18</sup>

[S]eventy-three [defendants charged with blackmail] gave more details about their origins and education. Whereas over a dozen of them clearly came from the criminalized lumpen-proletariat, the remaining individuals reflected the full social spectrum: skilled workers, clerks, artists, peasants, peddlers, confectioners, four streetcar drivers, eight high school students, and even one “French language tutor.” The highest social circles were represented by a young count, who was arrested while trying to extort a ransom from two Jewish peddlers (Grabowski, 2004, pp. 45–46).<sup>19</sup>

18 Grabowski studied the blackmailing of Jews by examining the verdicts of German courts in Warsaw. The perpetrators – a tiny proportion of them – faced trial when they impersonated the Gestapo, erroneously accused Poles, bribed German officials (which was a widespread phenomenon) or were denounced by the blackmailed Jews (this would happen at the beginning of the occupation).

19 Let us be reminded that the blackmailing of Jews was never fundamentally resisted and rejected either by the underground state or by society, as evidenced by the ethical code of the underground state (Grabowski, 2004, chapter *Kary* [Punishments]). Or about those choosing to conceal their aid to Jews (Gross, 2001a; Grudzińska-Gross & Gross, 2012).



Antisemitic practice was not restricted to blackmailing, it also involved the pillage and plundering of Jewish property. A dispatch in *Agencja Prasowa* of October 7, 1942 on the Polish response to the deportation of the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto reports mass pillaging by all classes:

The moment the townhouses in the Warsaw Ghetto were abandoned, whole packs of jackals made their way there, behind those ghastly walls, to steal blood-smeared possessions reeking of corpses. [...] [Policemen were followed by] social scum who plundered and stole whatever they could put their hands on. [...] Groups of youngsters, sometimes only 12–14 years old, roam the streets of Warsaw now, shamelessly selling the stolen goods. It is particularly disturbing that the general public does not respond to this abhorrence [...]. It is a shame to note that this plunder of property is perpetrated not only by the lowly, the people at the lowest mental level, but also by individuals distinguished by the features of the intelligentsia, or at least by those aspiring to such status [...]. Similar instances of such a collective lack or degeneration of honesty and sense of humanity are reported across the country (*Agencja Prasowa* of October 7, 1942).

These “aspiring” “individuals” “distinguished by the features” are in fact the Warsaw intelligentsia, although the author of the dispatch finds it difficult to use this label and classify these individuals as members of his own class. It can be seen that all social classes take part in plundering and denouncing. However, this image of the cross section of society keeps disappearing and evaporating and shifts from the universal to the marginal in society. It is particularly the intelligentsia that vanishes from this picture, even though examples of them blackmailing and looting are relatively easy to find.

Alina Margolis was hiding on the “Aryan side” in an intelligentsia family. She recalls the following story: “The Professor’s wife found me a place with a family of architects in Ursynów. I’m saying ‘architects’ because both the Master and his wife were architects. He might even have been the Chief Architect of Warsaw before the war, or one of chief architects” (Margolis-Edelman, 1999, p. 88). The family were dedicated to working in the underground; this was a so-called patriotic family risking their lives in clandestine activity. They did not know that Alina was Jewish and took her in as the orphaned daughter of a Polish Army officer. They treated her as one of their own, a family member; the national and class codes clearly operated in this case. Margolis witnessed a moment when the “Master” found two little Jewish boys hiding under the terrace of his villa. His first reaction was to turn his anger against the General’s wife, who had sheltered the boys there, and then

he ordered her to bring the children out. They were small, very dirty, they hung their heads and I could not see their eyes. [...] Helpless and devastated, I watched the children walk with the Master, one on the left-hand side, the other on the right-hand side; he was holding their hands firmly. They never came back. The second time was when the Ghetto was burning. The glow was clearly visible in the sky. Jaga said, ‘Do you see how it’s burning?’ Master said, ‘It’s a pity Tuwimes is not out there’ (Margolis-Edelman, 1999, p. 90).

Let me stress this one more time: contrary to popular belief, the Holocaust did not weaken antisemitic attitudes, but actually intensified them, which is reflected in the texts penned directly after the pogrom in Kielce (by Kazimierz Wyka, Mieczysław Jastrun,

Julian Przyboś),<sup>20</sup> as well as in modern texts authored by Jan Tomasz Gross, Jan Grabowski, Łukasz Krzyżanowski (Krzyżanowski, 2016)<sup>21</sup> and historians associated with the Polish Center for Holocaust Research. Different forms of participation in the third phase of the Holocaust were not in conflict with one's education, high social status, civil engagement or even courage. The image of the lumpenproletariat and socially marginalized individuals being involved in denouncing Jews, thereby exposing themselves to ostracism and aversion from the rest of society, is clearly not accurate. Margolis herself highlighted the fact that, contrary to her own expectations, such attitudes were displayed among the intelligentsia, who were so committed to fighting the Germans, and fulfilled all the codes and standards of "decency"; "[t]his was truly their only deficiency" (Margolis-Edelman, 1999, p. 90). However, in historical memory, the image of the intelligentsia will be blurred, shifted towards individual incidents or erased altogether.

## Shifts

The antisemitism of the intelligentsia during the war was emphasized not only by Kazimierz Wyka, but also by Jerzy Andrzejewski in his famous novel *Holy Week* (Andrzejewski, 2007). The book paints a comprehensive picture of Polish antisemitism, ranging from its "moderate" and "transparent" form, which was a mere reproduction of the social context, to a more active and aggressive form leading directly to Jewish deaths.<sup>22</sup> The drama takes place mainly among the intelligentsia. The main protagonist, Malecki, is hiding a Jewish woman whom he was friends with in the past. Before the war, Malecki was a member of student organizations but, he says, he was not in favor of "any such methods" (i.e. beatings at universities); however, as aptly noted by his adversary, Julek (his younger brother and a communist), he never opposed antisemitic tenets (Andrzejewski, 2007, pp. 41–42) and, when the uprising breaks out in the Warsaw Ghetto, he does not oppose the Jew-baiting statements uttered by his business partner who praises the Holocaust (Andrzejewski, 2007, pp. 79–80). At the heart of the drama there is also the epitome of femininity: pregnant, Catholic Anna, who is concerned about the unhappiness of the whole world but replicates the antisemitic stereotype of the deicide perpetrated by Jews, and ponders whether maybe that was the reason for the Holocaust (Andrzejewski, 2007, p. 53). Compared to other characters, the Maleckis appear to be moderate, understanding and protective.

20 These texts can be found in volume two of the anthology by Adam Michnik *Przeciw antysemityzmowi* (Michnik, 2010). [Some of them are present in the shorter English edition – editor's note.] First and foremost, I mean Mieczysław Jastrun, *Potęga ciemnoty* (Michnik, 2010, pp. 2–9) [*The power of ignorance*, Michnik & Marczyk, 2018, pp. 65–92], Zdzisław Libera, *Antysemityzm* (Michnik, 2010, pp. 9–16), Jerzy Andrzejewski, *Zagadnienie polskiego antysemityzmu* (Michnik, 2010, pp. 17–20) [*The problem of Polish anti-Semitism*, Michnik & Marczyk, 2018, pp. 93–112], Kazimierz Wyka, *Potęga ciemnoty potwierdzona* (Michnik, 2010, pp. 30–33), and Julian Przyboś, *Hariba antysemityzmu* (Michnik, 2010, pp. 225–228).

21 Krzyżanowski's book discusses the situation of the Jews returning to their homes in Radom after the war. It paints a picture of mass expropriation, murders that no one investigated, appeals made by commanders of the partisan units still active after the disbandment of the Home Army, who exhorted Jews to leave and their Polish neighbors to exclude the Jews. It illustrates the omnipresent antisemitism both at the lowest and higher social levels and the true activities of the forces of the old and new state, such as the post-1945 police (*milicja*).

22 For more on this topic see my above-mentioned text: Chmielewska, 2018.

The text features the voices of people in the streets and remarks made by Poles at the walls of the burning, still-fighting Ghetto. “Hanging up there real good, isn’t he?,” they say about the dead body of a Jewish insurgent hanging in the window frame (Andrzejewski, 2007, p. 20); children chase a Jewish fugitive, driving him straight into a policeman’s arms. A watchful eye becomes an active hand in the novel. In line with the intelligentsia’s pattern, Andrzejewski blamed all the misfortunes of the hiding woman, Irena Lilien, on the Piotrowskis – a jealous, primitive woman and her husband, a boor who sexually abuses his victims. Nevertheless, Andrzejewski presents an antisemitic cultural pattern rooted in pre-war exclusion which does not occur at the social margins at all, but involves the intelligentsia as well. This knowledge has vanished, however, and an interesting shift occurred in a much later big-screen adaptation of this story by Andrzej Wajda (1995). The director shows antisemites without antisemitism. The traditional Catholic anti-Judaism and antisemitism is absent. The general background disappears from the movie, which does not present a social perspective; the removal of “the voices of the street” and “the voices at the Ghetto walls” deprives the protagonists of their social background, and their behavior becomes a strictly moral and individual issue. In the forefront, we can see the protagonists who save the Jews and help them, rather than the Piotrowskis, who drive Irena out of her shelter, and represent the social margins and moral cesspit. In the movie, Julek cannot remain a communist, so the director makes him a member of the Grey Ranks, thereby turning him into a figure symptomatic of Polish society. Unlike in Andrzejewski’s text, Julek is not a noble exception and a madman, but becomes a model Pole. In the movie, Anna is a saint who experiences the Holocaust as both a collective and personal calamity and could never think about the Jews as deicide perpetrators. Anna is crucified Christ. Catholicism, as a significant determinant of Polish culture and identity, is *a priori* cleansed from all guilt even before any accusations arise.<sup>23</sup> Wajda adds an episode to his film, absent from Andrzejewski’s book, in which a Polish unit of the Grey Ranks enter the burning Ghetto.<sup>24</sup> Polish youngsters, essentially children, rush to support the fighting Ghetto in an entirely suicidal, romantic gesture, which is apparently representative of the Polish nature, but has little in common with reality. The contrast between Irena and Julek is worth noting. The Grey Ranks are going to fight on her behalf and for her – the one in hiding. This is a meaningful scene which evidences a symbolic transfer taking place in Wajda’s film: the passive element is associated with the Jews (Irena and Zamojski), and the active and heroic element is attributed to Poles. But the original novel is actually a story about heroic Jews fighting in the Ghetto and the “poor Poles” who only “look at the Ghetto” at best, and are guilty of indifference, as Błoński put it (Błoński, 2018, p. 284). This change is essential: Wajda’s film

23 The figure of Anna, a “genuine Catholic,” effectively incapacitates questions about the historical and factual relationship between Catholicism and antisemitism. As in Błoński’s text (Błoński, 2018), here as well we can see the strategy of “we were not Catholic enough” and the conviction that it is precisely Catholicism that allegedly cures antisemitism, a claim that seems unjustified given the historical context.

24 There are at least a dozen people in the division, all practically children. The associations with the *Canal* are inevitable, as are the associations with the Warsaw Uprising. The scenes when the unit enters the Ghetto alternate with those in which Irena is tensely rolling up cigarettes and preparing to light one in bed – when she is about to light it, a salvo resounds. This intertwining of the two themes underlines the contrast between the passive Irena and the active youngsters who are embarking on a hopeless struggle, offering their lives.

is focused on presenting evidence of Polish spiritual nobility and courage. The tale about the hiding and denouncing of Jews and Polish attitudes to the Holocaust (Andrzejewski) transforms into a tale about moral challenges to which the Polish intelligentsia (whom the audience may symbolically identify with) managed to face up, albeit at the cost of their own lives. The relationship between the original text and the movie is an apt illustration of the shift which has occurred in social consciousness alongside the work of memory. The intelligentsia as a class responsible for the reproduction of antisemitism disappears from sight, helping becomes the standard rather than the exception, and the Polish intelligentsia and Catholicism are jointly and smoothly absolved of responsibility.

### **Modern narratives about the third stage of the Holocaust**

The size of this study does not allow me to present a number of interesting phenomena and meanders in this process. Therefore, I am moving on to modern history, namely to the last fifteen years, which will be presented very briefly.<sup>25</sup> In 2000, the film *Neighbors* (*Sąsiedzi*) by Agnieszka Arnold and a book under the same title by Jan Tomasz Gross marked a watershed in the debate on the attitudes of Poles towards the Jews, or rather on Polish involvement in the Holocaust (cf. Nowicka-Franczak, 2017; Bikont, 2004; Szarota, 2004; Libionka, 2012; Machcewicz & Persak, 2002). Further books penned by Gross, *Fear* (*Strach*) and *Golden harvest* (*Złote żniwa*) (written in collaboration with Irena Grudzińska-Gross), studies by Jan Grabowski, scholars from the Polish Center for Holocaust Research and the Jewish Historical Institute and others have expanded the field of analysis. These studies have introduced this topic to public discourse in Poland, as they did not limit themselves to the specialist academic discourse of history.<sup>26</sup> This knowledge has finally entered general consciousness, and found expression in works of visual art, literature and a number of modern films, ranging from famous examples such as *Ida* (2013, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski) and *Aftermath* (*Pokłosie*) (2012, dir. Władysław Pasikowski), through less famous ones, such as *Klezmer* (2015, dir. Piotr Chrzan), *Sekret* (*Secret*) (2012, dir. Przemysław Wojcieszek), to films that are not so obvious, such as that of Anna and Wilhelm Sasnal (*Z daleka widok jest piękny / It looks pretty from a distance*, 2011). The majority of these movies were made between 2011 and 2013.

The historical texts referred to above share similar outlooks and topics; they focus on the murdering, denouncing and plundering of Jews during the Holocaust, in particular after the liquidation of the ghettos, that is, in the Holocaust's third stage. They show those in hiding and their situation, but, first and foremost, they focus on the perpetrators, and analyze the whole social and institutional network engaged in hunting Jews: village leaders, Blue Police, night watchmen, fire brigades. The texts show the fear of

<sup>25</sup> The most recent events and representations are also addressed by Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski in *Philo-Semitic violence? New Polish narrative about Jews after 2000* (Janicka & Żukowski, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> I refer to more academic studies in footnote 8 hereof.

those who resolved to offer help to Jews in the extensive context of the social structure of antisemitic violence and crime. The authors of the *Golden harvest* stress the fact that the “elimination of Jews from economic life was welcomed both by elites and the general public all across the European continent” (Grudzińska-Gross & Gross, 2012, p. 16). The plundering of Jews was not incidental or abusive, it was “a social practice rather than a criminal activity or the deviant behavior of some rogue individuals. That plundering was widespread and sanctioned is revealed precisely by the forms of reference to it captured in language” (Grudzińska-Gross & Gross, 2012, p. 77). Many people treated the seizure of Jewish property as a patriotic duty of reclaiming property for the sake of Poland; all social classes had a part in it: not only the peasants plundering utensils, clothes, huts, money, and valuables; but also the bourgeoisie plundering townhouses, apartments, and factories; and lawyers taking part in the procedure of “reappropriation” (Grabowski, 2005). Nevertheless, all the studies referred to above, although thorough, convincing and enlightening, and despite offering accurate and comprehensive analysis of the social conditions of murdering and plundering of the Jews throughout the country, focus on peasants.

It is both characteristic and intriguing that there are no studies dedicated to other social groups, in particular to the intelligentsia, who, as I have tried to demonstrate, took part in and benefited from this process to quite a considerable extent; and who had earlier helped to create the conditions for this process, producing and reproducing antisemitic tropes, images and cultural patterns facilitating exclusion and engagement in the Holocaust. Let me stress once again that, alongside clothes, shoes, money and valuables, also townhouses, apartments, small businesses, lawyer’s offices, medical practices, and so on and so forth were appropriated. This was not carried out by peasants but by the Polish bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. Significantly, the underground government warned against this practice and its concerns were not exaggerated, as might be shown by an analysis of appeals published in the July 19, 1940, issue of *Biuletyn*, the periodical of the Information and Propaganda Office (BIP) of the ZWZ. As already discussed, we are still lacking an analysis that would investigate this particular aspect of the Holocaust.

Sometimes much greater shifts occur in public discourse. The intelligentsia is not so much left in the shadow, but it treats itself as a counterweight to the criminal and murderous peasants, and presents itself as a benevolent but weak master who, due to the crisis of authority triggered by the war, was not strong enough to prevent evil. Thus the intelligentsia is supposed to be a moral and actual barrier against the exclusion, plundering and murdering. This strategy of self-absolution finds numerous manifestations, but it is particularly striking in the studies of renowned social historians:

In the AB action, the Germans carried out mass arrests of the intelligentsia. [...] In this way, wartime migrations and exterminations, and battlefields brought the demise of “Poland A”: the educated, opinion-forming, clerical class identifying with the values and symbols of the Second Republic. Today, we would call them the middle class, the foundation of a stable

social order. The absence of this group needs to be considered as part of the genesis of peasants murdering aliens (Zaremba, 2011, p. 72).

Further on, we can read that the murderers who “did not get on the train of modernization” do not even have a worldview, but only a limited world of images and beliefs at best, and the conviction that one has to steal in order to possess. They are utter strangers, therefore, and an ethnographic exegesis is needed to understand how the world works for them, which is very different from the way it works “for us, permeated by puritanical asceticism which preaches of the relationship between work and wealth” (Zaremba, 2011, p. 72). This patronizing tone that paints an utterly false image of the role of the intelligentsia and ignores historical realities is not an incidental occurrence but the dominant discourse, whereby the intelligentsia can not only avoid being accused of antisemitism and engagement in the Holocaust but also be cast *a priori* on the side of the Jews’ helpers. This tale of the intelligentsia about itself conceals its role, distorts the image of the past, and blurs concrete events and realities to produce a flattering image of the guardian of morality who takes the right side and bears witness. The intensive moralizing, taking advantage of the power of authority in blurring the past, and indicating others as the sole perpetrators allows one to speak not only about symbolic violence but about, firstly, a “diluted” politics of memory which is not implemented by state institutions and for the purpose of a single campaign, nor by a single, identifiable and clearly delineated entity, but constitutes a prolonged process; and, secondly, about a permanent way of forming the framework of public discourse which is not directly associated with political authorities, the government, a certain ministry, or any particular agenda, but with the habitus of the intelligentsia. Not only does this framework determine the conditions for presenting the past and decide what is presented and what is ignored, but it also shapes the members of the intelligentsia as subjects who can only undertake the effort of critically analyzing their own practices with great difficulty, surpassing in a way their own cultural condition.

These phenomena are most poignantly illustrated by the contemporary films which I have mentioned above. I would like to describe them collectively, thereby emphasizing the fundamental features of the consciousness about Polish engagement in the Holocaust, even if at risk of oversimplification. All of these films share their unprecedented courage in how they tackle tales of Polish participation in the Holocaust. The film which is least known to the general public, *Klezmer* (2015, dir. Piotr Chrzan), particularly deserves to be mentioned for its superb focus on the complex cultural, social and material motivations for denouncement and plunder. *Klezmer* demonstrates the strong link between the old (Catholic and folk) and new antisemitism (rooted in the National Democratic spirit). Even in this film, however, we come across a typical shift: the image of Wituś, a peasant who finds a half-dead, unconscious Jew and resolves with his peers to denounce him for money, reveals the true face of the primitive antisemitism of peasants, among whom selling and denouncing is a standard, and the image of the horned Jew is mixed with fighting for an Aryan economy. There are two mutually contradictory



attitudes intertwined here: antisemitism as part of culture and as non-culture. In the latter approach, it is not culture at all but its deficiency, primitivism, innate cruelty, exclusion and callousness that cause murdering, plundering – and exclusion. This line of thought is even stronger in *It looks pretty from a distance* (2011) by Anna and Wilhelm Sasnal, who show naturalistic and abominable peasants living in the realm of a *sui generis* nature, or rather “second nature,” defined by degradation, ceaseless violence towards women, animals, the elderly, the crippled and those who display weakness. Their utterances start with “What the fuck...” and end with “...fuck off.” The naturalistic presentation and essentialization of peasant inferiority and of their hypo-culture explains their engagement in the Holocaust, plundering and murders. Of course, this approach does not leave room for the role of cultural patterns or the social aspect. A tiny bit of culture might have remedied the evil, yet peasants are after all immune to culture.

Not only does culture disappear from the stand of the accused, so does the intelligentsia, even before any charges are pressed. Let us be clear: some, or even the majority, of hiding Jews were plundered and killed by peasants, but not only by peasants. This metonymical shift allows the intelligentsia to cleanse themselves from the charge of antisemitism, to avoid the question of their role in the Holocaust. The intelligentsia do not focus the spotlight on themselves, they do not speak *pro domo sua* but only about peasants who, due to differences in symbolic capital, can easily be identified as the only guilty party. The intelligentsia blur their own image in the past, allowing peasants alone to take the blame. With the whole antisemitic odium thus transferred to the peasants, the version of history in which the intelligentsia produces exclusion and racial hatred is denied, and this results in the recurrent and erroneous thesis, or rather alibi, that antisemitism is ignorance, lack of culture and boorishness rather than a persistent cultural pattern. Antisemitism is not us, cultured people; it is them, the abominable and primitive others who have nothing in common with us. The history of the last decade shows that Poles can be responsible for the Holocaust, but the Polish intelligentsia, apparently, still cannot.

Translated by Katarzyna Matschi

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#### Inteligencja i Zagłada. Rozpraszanie obrazu

**Abstrakt:** Tekst z zakresu badań nad pamięcią kulturową dotyczy pracy pamięci, a właściwie polityki pamięci, w której ramach ze społecznej świadomości znika obraz inteligencji i jej roli podczas Zagłady. Względnej widzialności chłopskiego wydawania Żydów, ich mordowania i grabienia towarzyszy niewidzialność inteligencji i jej kluczowej roli w reprodukowaniu wykluczenia i wzorów antysemickich poprzedzających Zagładę i umożliwiających pośrednio zaangażowanie w wydarzenia, a także jej własnego udziału w Zagładzie.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** Zagłada; polityka pamięci; inteligencja

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