
**Casimir the Great's Flying Circus presents:
'The narrowest house in the world –
an event on a global scale.'**

**Historical re-enactment on the occasion
of the 70th anniversary of the *Aktion Reinhardt***

Elżbieta Janicka

Abstract: The article provides a multifaceted analysis of the Keret House as an artistic installation and a cultural event. The construction is placed in the analytical context of Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon*, Le Corbusier's machine for living, Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Pojazd dla bezdomnych* (Vehicle for the Homeless), Big Brother and XTube. Other interpretative contexts are: the history of the Warsaw ghetto, the *Aktion Reinhardt* as well as the ensemble of issues connected with the third phase of the Holocaust (i.e. 'the margins of the Holocaust'): the history of Jewish hide-outs, the hunt for the Jews (*Judenjagd*), the plunder of Jewish mobile and immobile property, the Polish part of the biography of Etgar Keret's parents. From such a perspective, the Keret House takes the form of a macabre historical re-enactment. The analytical framework comprises Erving Goffman's stigma theory as well as the history of the attitude of the Polish majority towards the Jewish minority. With increasing frequency, anti-Semitic symbolic violence assumes the form of philosemitic symbolic violence. The poetics of gift and the category of 'a Jewish writer with a sense of humour' function as an instrument of blackmail that place the individual subjected to it in a situation with no way-out. In Polish majority culture, the image of Jews as guests, which corresponds to the representation of Poland as home and Poles as hospitable hosts, heirs of the myth of King Casimir the Great, plays the same role. The Keret House proves to be a machine for the reproduction of the Polish majority narrative about the majority attitude of Poles towards Jews, also during the Holocaust. What is at stake within this narrative is the image of Poland and the Poles.

Keywords: Keret House; 'the narrowest house in the world'; antisemitism; philosemitic violence; symbolic violence; Operation Reinhardt ('Aktion Reinhardt'); margins of the Holocaust; hunt for the Jews ('Judenjagd'); Jewish hide-outs; image of Poland and the Poles; domination; exclusion; re-enactment; 'Jewish place'; 'Jewish humour'; stigma; minstrelization; 'glorious death'

'Because the Polish nation [...] is an extraordinary nation.
Casimir the Great received the Jews and pampered them,
and to this day he loves them.'

Marek Edelman, 1985
(Grupińska & Filipek, 2000, p. 30)

What will they say about us abroad?

Concern for one's own collective image on the part of the dominant majority in Poland is usually not accompanied by sensitivity to the very phenomena which cause problems with the image. If such sensitivity did exist, the majority would counteract these phenomena in a long-term and systematic way, regardless of outside opinion, be

it positive or negative, on matters of its own concern. The problems with self-image would then be incomparably smaller, indeed perhaps they would not even arise. Surely however, if treated more rationally, they would not be capable of exciting a moral panic of the kind that accompanied the nationwide debates on Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz, the 'Papal cross' at the gravel-pit in Auschwitz, the religious symbols on the field of ashes in Birkenau or the books by Jan Tomasz Gross (Forecki, 2010). The above examples point to a connection between a fixation with self-image and a fixation on identity and belonging, whereby affiliation and identity – identification with a group as well as identity within a group – are considered axiological categories and based on the concept of nation as defined in ethnic-religious terms. In effect, 'contemporary Poland is a country where the idea of a uniform collective identity is widely accepted, according to which liberal pluralism is suspiciously close to moral relativism or even nihilism' (Walicki, 2013, p. 203).¹

The collective dependence on one's own reputation constitutes a form of collective narcissism. It is rooted in an internal reluctance to make an independent decision about oneself and hence to take responsibility for the decision made. In the Polish context, the refusal to confront the consequences of one's own choices seems to be a symptom of cultural inertia. The fixation with one's own collective image not only colours the perception of reality. It has even been reflected and preserved in a firm, ritualistic formula that testifies to its socio-cultural as well as linguistic obviousness. 'What will they say about us abroad?' is a formula in which the categories 'abroad' and 'they' do not require further definition as they are immediately comprehensible for every user of the Polish language. The mental-emotional deficit in question generates a compulsion – an uncontrollable internal necessity of behaving in a specific way.²

This finds its expression in an imperative to engage in spectacular PR actions addressed to an external authority of judgement. The oracle – necessarily external vis-à-vis the community – is imagined as powerful and influential, if not omnipotent. It is also often perceived as being under the influence of an additional, surreptitious power working behind the scenes and thus considered particularly dangerous for the community. Within

1 Walicki is willing to differentiate between various elements of nationalism dominant in Poland: Catholic ethno-nationalism and a strain of integral nationalism as preached by right-wing National Democrats (*Endecja*). I refer here to the dominant model in the public sphere and transmitted by the state in its most concrete form through public education and in theory directed to all citizens, i.e. the Catholic ethno-nationalist model.

2 The Polish compulsive attitude towards one's own collective image manifested itself on the threshold of the independence of the II Polish Republic (*II Rzeczpospolita*), when a wave of pogroms swept through the country, and in London and New York demonstrations took place under the banner: 'We appeal to Great Britain to stop the butchery of Jews in Poland,' 'We protest against the continued slaughter of innocent Jewish men, women and children in Poland,' 'Poland, stop killing!' The demonstrations were regarded as slandering of Poland, whereas the pogroms themselves were being justified. The latter 'were not firmly condemned by any important Polish group' (Cała, 2012, p. 316). On the occasion of the debate about the crimes in Jedwabne Jan Tomasz Gross wrote: 'Anxious comments in the press such as "what will they say about us?" are rather misplaced here: at the most they give further testimony to the Poles, alienated collective identity due to the falsification of Polish-Jewish relations during the war years. I write "further" because it is not the first time that the concerned patriots react to the persecution of Jews in Poland in such a way. "At the protest gatherings after the Kielce pogrom the Polish speakers very often repeated – as the Zionist *Opinia* wrote on 25 July 1946 – the formula «What will they say about us abroad?» How much one would wish to hear something as simple and as pleasant-sounding as: «What will our fellow Jewish citizens think about us?»" The fact of the matter is that we will not lay the foundation for a free and creative collective existence by nervously following the reflection of our own face in the eyes of others' (Gross, 2003, pp. 20-21).

the *imaginarium* of periphery cultures the imagined authority of this type is situated within the cultural centre, i.e. the so-called West. In the Polish idiom – at least from the 1980s onwards – one of the most distinguishable embodiments of an oracle is the daily newspaper *The New York Times*, or to be more precise, the common notions concerning its omnipotence.³

Of the most recent Polish self-image initiatives, one stands out in this context. This particular case, the universally acclaimed Keret House, is an installation and at the same time a performance, an object and an event, a sign-symbol and a story-narrative. It was generated as such by various actors: its initiators-authors, participating observers, and finally the nominal hero, i.e., Etgar Keret himself. As a social fact and media event, the Keret House has produced a discursive universe. The latter, in return, reproduces, enhances and impacts on the former. An inherent part of my reflection will therefore be devoted to the analysis of discourse, which in the case of the Keret House had its own unofficial variant. However, it yielded to the superiority of the official format – representational and representative not only in a statistical sense but also in the sense of social-cultural legitimacy.

The Keret House attracted crowds of spectators and produced an unanimous, positive resonance throughout a whole cross-section of society. It was mainly addressed to the liberal intelligentsia of the young generation. However, it was appreciated by a wider community. It hit a communal nerve: the need for belonging, the sense of identity as well as image aspirations transcending societal divisions. In examining the various aspects and layers of meaning of the Keret House, the question to be addressed is: to what extent do they form a coherent and consistent system or pattern of thinking allowing us to draw conclusions about the community, its worldview, boundaries and structure as well as the distribution of roles within it? In addition, the following issues are of interest to me: What is the relation of the image-building success to the causes of the problem with the image? To what extent did the PR campaign expose these causes? Did it help in working through and overcoming them, thereby proposing a new order? This study is an attempt to view the Keret House as a miniature model of the culture that brought it into existence.

³ The history of the phantasma of *The New York Times* as organ of the mythic 'New York Jews' and the not any less mythic 'international Jewry' remains to be written. Generically and morphologically, however, it is a variant of the anti-Semitic conspiratorial theory codified for example in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Tazbir, 2004).



The narrowest house in the world (architect Jakub Szczęsny), general view – the settlement joint between 74 Żelazna and 22 Chłodna Streets, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka



The narrowest house in the world (architect Jakub Szczęsny), close-up – the settlement joint between 74 Żelazna and 22 Chłodna Streets, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka

The Logic

'This is an event on a global scale.' So announced the biggest newspaper in Poland (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 1). In the country's capital, Warsaw, where Żelazna Street intersects with Chłodna Street, with the buildings practically touching each other and with hardly any space in-between, an architect saw the potential. In a cranny, which he termed a space 'abandoned and forgotten' [statement by Jakub Szczęsny (cited in: Bartoszewicz, 2012e, p. 4)], the architect installed something (hereafter referred to as the object). The object is not visible from the outside. 'Passers-by do not notice it' (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 1). If it is noticed from the street, it resembles at most a ventilation shaft or a discarded metal item. Until recently, 'the tenants used this cranny as a storage space for large household items, specifically the old and unwanted ones which were too large to fit in the normal bin' (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 27). As the press put it:

'The constructed object concerned is situated between the pre-war house at 73 Żelazna Str. and an apartment building on Chłodna Str. At its widest it is 152 cm' (Bartoszewicz, 2012d, p. 1).

'In 1942, not too far away from this cranny, there was a wooden footbridge, which connected the two parts of the ghetto over the "Aryan" Chłodna Street. On ground level within this cranny a steel construction was successfully installed; a number of steep stairs leading up from the street, and the whole thing looks a bit like a space vehicle' (Bartoszewicz, 2012c, p. 27).

'One enters up the stairs and through a trap door and then up a ladder to the space where there is a bed. We have a comfortable Sultan mattress, bedclothes with colourful polka-dots, an orange stool, on which lies a copy of *Dad Runs Away with the Circus*. There is water in the tap above the sink in a mini-kitchen, as well as a heater – everything functions as it should. The project displays clock-work precision, ergonomics to the millimetre, the whole house measuring in sum approximately 14 m². The WC with a shower is bigger and more comfortable than a toilet in an aeroplane' (Bartoszewicz, 2012c, p. 27; Keret & Modan, 2011).

'The size of the building determines the furnishings. The top stairs serves as a doormat and the refrigerator can only hold a few bottles. Like a little house for dwarfs' (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 1).

'The elevations are made of polycarbonate, and the front is covered with stainless steel' (Bartoszewicz, 2012c, p. 27).

On 20 October 2012, on a Saturday, at high noon, the ceremonial inauguration of the object took place – the moving in and the handing over of keys. It involved the participation of the mayor of the city and crowds of Warsaw residents.

The possibility of understanding phenomena is based upon the ability to place them within context. What is incomprehensible in one constellation will be clear, or even banal in another. In this way, a provisional and ephemeral object, at first neither recognizable nor acceptable as a house, appears as a house if there is a change of context and a resulting relativization of the category of house. This would apply to a container or a night shelter. Conditions which would not be acceptable for a typical tax-payer,

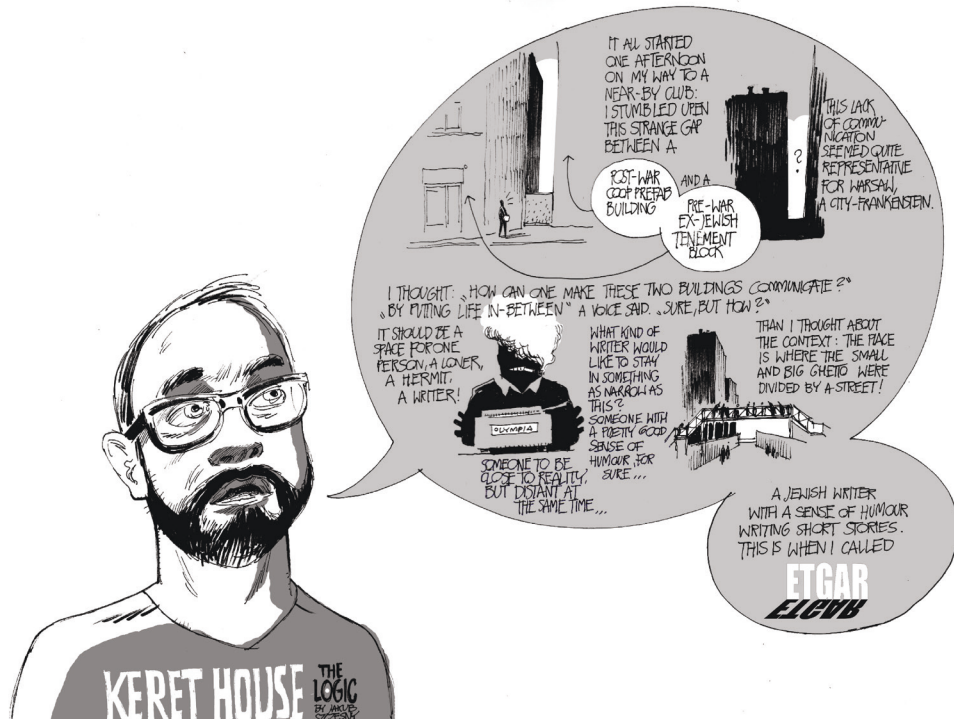
would appear to be like a gift from above for a homeless person or a refugee. However, if a socially excluded person would nonetheless raise objections to these conditions, they would be reminded by the beneficiaries of the system that they are superfluous and their lives therefore deserve to be torn to shreds and wasted, which is what actually happens.

In the case of the object that is of interest to us, the Keret House, the dislocation and relativization consist in ascribing it to a particular – let's say – addressee. It cannot be the owner, given the fact that the object is not mentioned in the mortgage register and from a legal point of view it does not exist; it wouldn't apply to a tenant either given the fact that according to the regulations it is not a residential building. 'In such an object no one can live permanently or even be registered in it' (Bartoszewicz, 2012c, p. 27). We are therefore not dealing here with a house *tout court* but with something that can be thought of as a house only as a result of the dedication of this something to... Etgar Keret. We get an idea of how all this came about if we study the architect's declaration. The statement, formulated in English, is entitled *Keret House: The Logic by Jakub Szczęsny*:

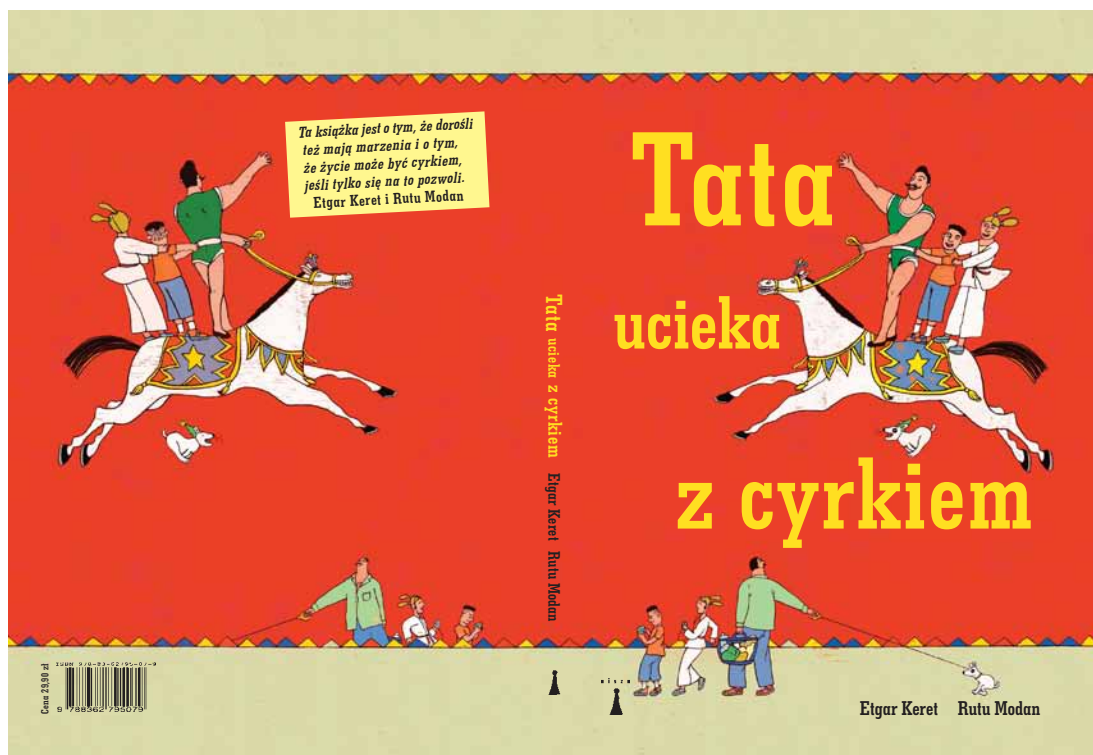
'It all started one afternoon on my way to a nearby club: I stumbled upon this strange gap between a post-war coop prefab building and a pre-war ex-Jewish tenement block. This lack of communication seemed quite representative for Warsaw, a city-Frankenstein. I thought: "How can one make these two buildings communicate?" "By putting life in-between." A voice said: "Sure, but how?" It should be a space for one person, a loner, a hermit, a writer! Someone to be close to the reality but distant at the same time... What kind of writer would like to stay in something as narrow as this? Someone with a pretty good sense of humour, for sure... Then I thought about the context: the place is where the small and big ghetto[s – E.J.] were divided by a street! A Jewish writer with a sense of humour writing short stories. This is when I called Etgar' (Szczęsny, n.d.).

The transformation is happening in front of our eyes: 'a strange gap, a space, this, something as narrow as this, the place' – all of this gives us as a result the eponymous Keret House. (The computer's spellcheck program, created surely by some Art Spiegelman enthusiast, patiently changes *House* into *Mouse*.)

We could leave things at this, if it wasn't for the conceptualization and contextualization that is formulated in the architect's statement. The represented world to which we are introduced focuses on two semantic fields. The first one is connected with the cranny/gulf/recess/discrepancy – the gap – and resulting in discontinuity, separation and lack of communication between that which is Jewish and that which is Polish – within a climate of the bizarre punctuated by the ghastly. The second semantic field comprises that which is Jewish, seen within the context of the former ghetto, and perceived as so-called *pożydowskie* ('post-Jewish' – the term refers to the act of robbing Jewish property) – also in the climate of horror. The unity of place where the events occur seems to reduce the discrepancy between the timelines (here and now / here and then). The figure of Frankenstein fulfils a connecting role, thanks to its characteristic feature of double meaning. In both cases, we have a commonplace, pop-cultural vision



Keret House. The Logic by Jakub Szczyński – from the archive of the project group CENTRALA (© Copyright by Jakub Szczyński)



Etgar Keret (text), Rutu Modan (illustrations), *Tata ucieka z cyrkiem* (Dad runs away with the circus), Wydawnictwo Nisza, Warszawa 2011 – from the archive of Wydawnictwo Nisza (© Copyright by Wydawnictwo Nisza)

of Frankenstein as a horror film monster, remote from the original character of the New Prometheus, Victor Frankenstein, as created by Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley. Today's Warsaw resembles a ghost, it is rather like Frankenstein's city. The Warsaw ghetto as that part of the city where the action takes place also lived, or rather died, under the symbol of Frankenstein. Frankenstein was the nickname for a German gendarme whose post – the so-called *Wache* ('sentry box') – was situated on Żelazna Street at the crossroads with Leszno Street, today Solidarności Street:

'He was a soldier who amused himself by shooting at children as if they were sparrows. When children came back to the ghetto after begging, they'd slip in through a hole in the wall one after another. He'd wait until there were a few of them, four or five "pieces" and then fire, dealing with them all in one go' (Blady-Szwajger, 1990, p. 47).⁴

Judaeus ex machina⁵

The effect of temporal compression, if not a feeling of going back in time, is exacerbated by the fact that an Israeli is named a 'Jewish writer' and is placed within the context of the ghetto and the Holocaust. The ascription of this particular individual to this particular place, as proposed in the Keret House's *Logic*, may appear logical to some people. However, it is also possible to imagine such a specific configuration of knowledge, imagination and expectations, in which one cannot make out anything logical about *The Logic*. From the perspective of contemporary critical art 'the narrowest house in the world' – at first sight a sign of the condition of the Pariah – seems to have been created for the purposes of an artistic intervention, which aims to draw attention to specific phenomena such as visible and hidden homelessness, lack of social apartments at the state and city level, the increase in the number of the so-called working poor who in spite of their hard work are not able to climb out of extreme poverty. What comes to mind here is a comparison with Krzysztof Wodiczko's American project *Pojazd dla bezdomnych* (*Vehicle for the Homeless*) (1988-1989), which is composed of an object and a series of performances:

'Built out of aluminium, sheet metal, steel net and Plexiglas the vehicle, intended for mass production, was supposed to afford protection for and improve the living conditions of homeless people. In the years 1987-88, according to official statistics, there were approximately 70,000 homeless people on the streets of New York. The majority of shelters for the homeless, and social housing in general, imposed upon the residents a strict prison-like discipline, which resulted in violence and abuse. This is why some homeless people, despite the harsh conditions, chose life on the street. The vehicle for homeless, while affording protection, allowing for a certain autonomy of life, providing transport, and being at the same

4 A translation from the Polish closer to the original might be as follows: 'He was the kind of gendarme who entertained himself by shooting at children as if at sparrows. When these children returned from begging through the hole in the wall to the ghetto, creeping in one after another, Frankenstein would wait until a few got through – four to five "pieces," one behind the other in one line – and then he would shoot, and with this one shot he finished off all of them.'

5 The formulation is taken from: Robert S. Wistrich, *Once Again: Anti-Semitism Without Jews* (Wistrich, 1992, p. 49). In my conviction, Wistrich's category remains valid in the context of philosemitic practices.

time a work instrument (for collecting bottles and cans), was also supposed to bear witness to the living conditions of the homeless and their existence on the margins of society' (Pojazd bezdomnych, n.d.).

The narrowest house in the world, and its very location, could serve as a visualization of the ideal of a community without community, as manifested in neoliberal Poland, where economic exclusion in both forms – hidden and open – is morally sanctioned and treated as part of societal-cultural obviousness.

Needless to say, had this been the intention, it would have been difficult to expect the partnership of the National Centre for Culture, the honorary patronage from the city authorities, as well as financing from the city's budget. One could probably also not have counted on the support from the Comedy Club 'Chłodna'. The interest of the media might have been considerably smaller as well. At first however, it is hard to believe that such a *Judaeus ex machina* could appear in this place for image and marketing reasons, as *de facto* – if we put the matter in the historical-societal context of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust – it is hard to think of a more devastating anti-advertising statement and a more catastrophic image than that which emanated on Żelazna Street in Warsaw, courtesy of the Poles. In this situation, however, something which is practiced in Poland with great proficiency, namely the neutralization of the historical-societal context and concrete events, comes into play. It is in fact the necessary condition for the success of the whole spectacle, and at the same time the necessary condition for the production and reproduction of the majority narrative about the Holocaust. The myth of a radical, essential distinctiveness of Polish anti-Semitism (exclusionary) from German anti-Semitism (exterminatory) is characteristic of this narrative. Then there is the myth of the Polish majority as bystanders, deprived of any contact with the Jews, and consequently without influence on their situation during the period of the Holocaust. At the same time, as knowledge about the extent and character of Polish crimes against Jews grows, there emerges a new narrative rationalizing the Holocaust by inscribing it into the logic of a group conflict. Central to this narrative, indeed its very foundation, is the equation of nazism with communism as well as the myth of Judeo-communism (*żydokomuna*). Seen in this light, the Polish crimes against the Jews – as well as the dominant type of Polish behaviour towards Jews – were supposed to be a penalty for the Soviet (and in conjecture: Jewish) crimes against the Poles and at the same time a necessary self-defence against communism (Janicka, 2014). This narrative is in the process of being deconstructed – thanks to the research effort by cultural anthropologists, historians, historians of ideas and literature, discourse analysts. In the public space however, it is stubbornly persistent. Indeed, very much so if a main stream newspaper can write the following about the narrowest house in the world: 'The project is fantastic, but the most important thing about it is its location' (Bartoszewicz & Czuba, 2012, p. 2).

The personal logic of *The Logic* – supposing that we are dealing here with logic – is additionally problematic since it is organized by the principle of representation.

At the intersection of Żelazna and Chłodna Streets we enter into the area of allegory. The addressee of the narrowest house is designated as an emblem. This means placing

‘this person in a category of which there can only be one current member, yet a category is nonetheless involved, and [the individual] is merely a member of it. Unique, historically entangled features are likely to tint the edges of our relation to this person; still, at the center is a full array of socially standardized anticipations that we have regarding [his or her] conduct and nature as an instance of the category [...]’ (Goffman, 1986, p. 53).

The selection process is threefold. Etgar Keret appears as an illustrative exemplification of an ideal type: ‘a loner, a hermit, a writer/a kind of writer, someone with a pretty good sense of humour.’ The optimal subset of the categorization is the category: ‘a Jewish writer with a sense of humour,’ from which we choose one element. Consequently, Etgar Keret is just one piece of a set, for which there are substitutes in the form of ‘Etgar Keret’s prominent friends (Kowalska, 2012, p. 28). It is therefore not Etgar Keret and not Jakub Szczęsny who appear on the scene or arena of identity. It is not even a writer and an architect but a Jew and a Pole. A Jew appointed by a Pole as a *pièce de résistance* of an architectural-media construction. The Pole – just as the Jew – is predictable, even if it is possible to imagine him in various exemplifications. What the Pole is like, everybody can see for themselves. For example everybody sees that the Pole is able to do things that seem impossible. The Pole can (*Polak potrafi*)⁶:

‘If the Pole is able to achieve passable quality for the A2 highway from Berlin to Warsaw for the Euro 2012, 40 hours before the first kick-off, then he can come up with a bed for Keret before the latter arrives on the doorstep with a pillow’ (Bartoszewicz & Czuba, 2012, p. 2).

Pole and Jew. Read: Poles and Jews. To the Jews on behalf of the Poles? *The Logic* is a narrative about an initial situation full of tension and negative energy. It contains, however, the promise of a happy end. The fatal gap here is set against a stop-gap with magical attributes: ‘Journalists from all over the world will arrive, because everything with the suffix “-est” plus a known writer works like a magnet. Heads and cameras will squeeze themselves into it and repeat: “Wow!”, squealing with delight’ (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 1). And yes, indeed. They did arrive. They did squeal with delight. ‘A war was waged over the right of precedence over the publication of photographs and films of the mini-house. The winner: *The New York Times*’ (Bartoszewicz, 2012c, p. 27). *The New York Times* itself. *The New York Times* in the flesh. An oracle when it comes to the subject of the image of Poland and the Poles. On a global scale.

What else do we have?

‘The Keret House may serve the Polish-Jewish rapprochement. It should really because here just next to it was the ghetto wall and the wooden bridge, which connected the two parts of the ghetto in 1942 over Chłodna Street’ (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 1).

6 A slogan emblematic of the propaganda of success in the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) during the 1970s.

However, it is difficult to figure out what the suggested implication might be. If p, then q. From which principle in relation to the vicinity to a place, in which there was the ghetto wall and the ghetto bridge (p), shall it follow that the narrowest house in the world serves Polish-Jewish rapprochement (q)? Whatever it is that the object might bring us closer to or connect us with, remains unclear, given the fact that 'it could not so much as touch the neighbouring houses, which had just been equipped with heat insulation, still under guarantee' (Bartoszewicz, 2012e, p. 4). However, let's not be petty-minded. Hocus-pocus, abracadabra, a magical pseudo-logical show and hey presto – based on the principle *Judaeus ex machina* – there appears a form of communication in a place marked by the lack of communication. Life in a place of death. After all, a technical term for cranny is 'settlement joint.' Even if it is not technically habitable, the term itself suggests a connecting and sedentary element. It sounds like a Polish joke. What does it look like and what does it give as a result?

'The narrowest house in the world is already the most famous Polish architectural-artistic project. It is the subject of description and commentary in both the mass media and alternative media – in the papers, blogs, and on Facebook. Enthusiasm predominates, even though comments such as the following also occur: "I think it looks like a tampon" (www.zgeek.com). John Metcalfe from "The Atlantic Cities" has a different opinion: "like an Aspirin pill, which fell between the cushions of a sofa" (because of a horizontal "parting" in the middle). The associations could have been more subtle on different stages of the project. A muslin screen? Fluttering net curtains? A shroud? A white spine of a book with the binding already ripped off?' (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 1).

"One can get used to everything, even to living in such a thing," thinks Mr. Piotr, the cleaning-man at 22 Chłodna Street.

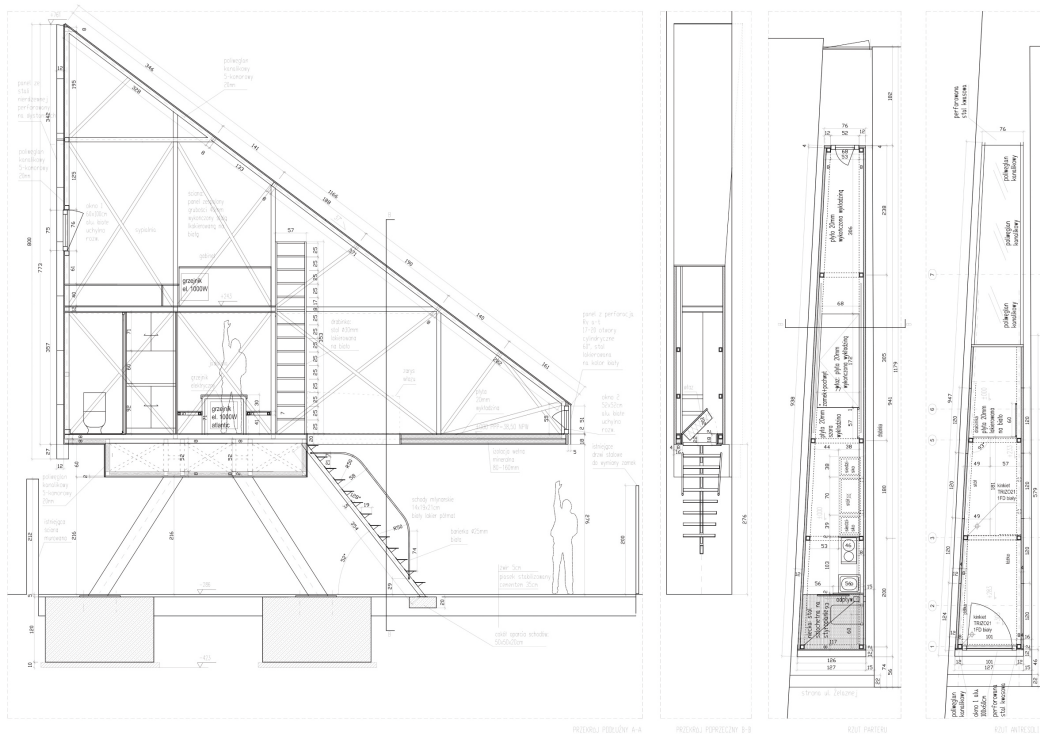
"A cage for an artist," wryly comments Beata Saratowicz, who has been living in this apartment block from the very beginning, that is for 37 years. [...] People should have better ideas than a coffin for an artist. [...] And I don't like these four towers (symbolizing the bridge from the year 1942, which connected the Large Ghetto and the Small Ghetto⁷ at Chłodna Street). There one can press a button and then music is heard. Continuously, I hear this musical phrase on the clarinet through the window.

The owner of a grocery store on Chłodna Street, who lives nearby, is pleased with the writer's hermitage in a cranny. "[...] I wouldn't work or live in such a way, I like having space," says Urszula Poniatowska while arranging the goods on the shelf. She insists: "I don't mind. And if it will attract additional customers, that is good because this year business has been poor as never before" (Bartoszewicz, 2012a, p. 2).

7 The Warsaw Ghetto had two main areas: the northern part, known as the Large Ghetto, and the southern part, known as the Small Ghetto.



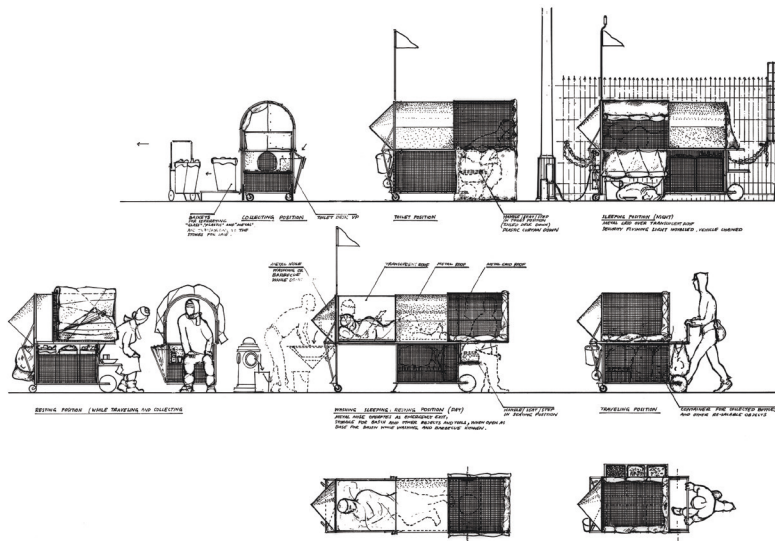
The narrowest house in the world (architect Jakub Szczęsny), interior visualization – from the archive of the project group CENTRALA (© Copyright by Jakub Szczęsny)



The narrowest house in the world (architect Jakub Szczęsny), plan of the interior – from the archive of the project group CENTRALA (© Copyright by Jakub Szczęsny)



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Pojazd dla bezdomnych* (Vehicle for the Homeless) (1988-1989) – Profile Foundation archive
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Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Pojazd dla bezdomnych* (Vehicle for the Homeless) (1988-1989), technical drawing – Profile Foundation archive (© Copyright by Fundacja Profile)

Historical re-enactment: general plan

The object on Żelazna Street and various performances connected with it took on an unintentional form of re-enactment – historical as well as macabre in the context of the scenario, according to which the fate of the Jews played itself out on the ‘Aryan side’ in occupied Poland from the beginning of the *Aktion Reinhardt*. In this respect, ‘the event on a global scale’ creates the impression of a collective Freudian slip. The photographs of the narrowest house in the world could have appeared in the report by Friedrich Katzmann, SS- und Polizeiführer in the district of Galicia, who was one of the organizers of the *Aktion Reinhardt*. Friedrich Katzmann reported to his superiors:

‘During the course of the actions (*Aktionen*) there arose other tremendous difficulties because the Jews strove to evade resettlement (*Aussiedlung*) at all costs. They not only tried to escape but also hid in all sorts of inconceivable spots, in drainage channels, in chimneys, even in liquid manure pits etc. They barricaded themselves in underground passages, in cellars extended into bunkers, in pits in the ground, in cunning hide-outs in attics and sheds, inside furniture etc.’ (Katzmann, 2001, p. 50).⁸

The *Aktion Reinhardt* meant the liquidation of the ghettos in the General Government and the Białystok region as well as the industrial extermination of those Jews who had already been deported from those places in the gas chambers of Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibór. From that time onwards those Jews who managed to avoid extermination – and indeed, their number was actually quite high – had to disappear. There was no place left for them where they could exist. The *Aktion Reinhardt*, whose 70th anniversary happened to fall in 2012, marks the beginning of the history of Jewish hiding. It is also the beginning of the final phase of the Holocaust:

‘This phase – which the Germans termed *Judenjagd*, or “hunt for Jews” had two stages: the first one [...] when the Germans (often with the help of the local Polish police) systematically caught those who were in hiding [...], and the second stage – which practically lasted until the end of the war, and involved tracking down, catching and murdering all those Jews who were still in hiding. During this final phase the Germans did not catch the Jews themselves – they only arrived after having been summoned or else they killed those whom the inhabitants of the villages and little towns had previously turned over to the gendarmerie outposts (in the big cities it was the *szmalcownicy* [blackmailers] and informers – having betrayed their hiding places – who handed over the Jews) [...]’ (Engelking, 2011, p. 25).

⁸ See also the photographs documenting the outside of various buildings, as well as the entrances to the shelters through a trapdoor on the floor, the inside ladders, beds with bedclothes and the heads looking inwards (Katzmann, 2001, pp. 27–53 – pagination according to the *facsimile* of the document). The description provided by Katzmann finds completion in Emanuel Ringelblum’s words: ‘The Blue Police [Polish State Police before 1939 – E.J.] took an active part in the “resettlement actions” everywhere. It was the rule for them to look for Jews in the various towns after the “liquidation.” Without aid from local elements, it was difficult for the Germans to look for Jews who were hiding. They had to be sought in attics, cellars, barns, etc., and for this, it was best to utilize police who were familiar with the terrain, with the lay-out of the flats, etc. This follow-up “action” would go on for several weeks and even sometimes for as long as several months, and as a result greater and greater number of Jews would be discovered. [...] punishment for hiding Jews and rewards for giving them away also helped. It is difficult to estimate the number of Jews in this country who fell victim thanks to the Blue Police; it must certainly amount to tens of thousands of those who managed to escape the German slaughterers’ (Ringelblum, 1992, p. 136).

'As the behaviour of the Poles often decided whether it was life or death for Jews, the role of the former became crucial from the point of view of the victims' (Engelking, 2011, p. 132). In this context, Barbara Engelking points to 'a shift of the object of the Jewish fear – from the Germans to the Poles' (Engelking, 2011, p. 132). Tadeusz Markiel describes Poles hunting down Jews and handing them over to their death as being the commissioners of the crimes, with the Germans – paradoxically – as their executioners (Markiel & Skibińska, 2011, p. 88). In the *Rejestr miejsc i faktów zbrodni popełnionych przez okupanta hitlerowskiego (Directory of places and facts concerning the crimes committed by the Hitlerist occupier)* the only accounts that remained after the social routine and collective staging of the hunt for Jews – including robbery, tortures and rapes – had played out would go along the lines of 'At this or that place, at this or that time, the Germans from this or that formation, murdered so and so many Jews.' The dominant Polish narrative about the Holocaust only preserves the memory of the final phase of this process. Meanwhile Jan Grabowski introduces us to the result achieved by the combined efforts of Poles and Germans:

'As we know today, very few managed to survive under the German occupation that lasted until 1945. In the summer of 1942, despite years of hunger, epidemics, and terror, some 2.5 million Polish Jews were still alive. Assuming that around 10 percent of the Jewish population of the liquidated ghettos tried to flee the deportations, one can argue that 250,000 people made an active attempt to save themselves from the policies of extermination. Of that number [...] less than 50,000 survived the war. The question is whether the 200,000 future victims of the *Judenjagd* lacked a chance from the very beginning' (Grabowski, 2013, p. 172).

On the basis of their analysis of the archive of the Central Committee of Polish Jews (*Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich*) Helena Datner and Alina Cała conclude that the majority of the Jews who survived:

'lived to see their liberation in the concentration camps and work camps. Considerably fewer, hid in forests, or survived thanks to the help of Polish society or in partisan units, in particular in the east of the country' (Cała & Datner-Śpiewak, 1997, p. 166).

From the point of view of Jews seeking rescue on the 'Aryan side' – Barbara Engelking writes – 'it was exactly the experience of lack [...] of community (civic, brotherly, human), which was one of the principal experiences of wandering around in Poland in the years 1942-1945' (Engelking, 2011, p. 132). On the basis of many years of research, I remain convinced that during the Holocaust the Polish norm of treating their Jewish co-citizens as foreign elements, if not outright enemies, proved to be an important factor within the German machinery of extermination. It made the extermination complete and irrevocable (Janicka & Żukowski, 2011, pp. 20–21). The foundation of this norm is the religious and 'patriotic legitimacy of the anti-Jewish feeling' (Smolar, 2010, p. 223). It is for this reason that the majority of Jewish hiding places did not prove to be safe at all. Apart from unavoidable questions about the norms and societal practices what follows from this is the conclusion drawn by Marcin Zaremba:

'Until 1944, the German losses on the territory of occupied Poland did not exceed 3,000 men. Thus, [...] we were not on the side, on which it seemed to us that we actually were, if we killed more Jews than Germans' (Zaremba, 2011, p. 22).

This however, is far from the whole set of meanings, which make up the denotations and connotations of the term 'Jewish hiding.'

Apart from the Katzmann report the representation of the narrowest house in the world could also figure in the work by Marta Cobel-Tokarska entitled *Bezludna wyspa, nora, grób. Wojenne kryjówki Żydów w okupowanej Polsce (A Desert Island, a Den, a Grave. Wartime Hide-Outs of Jews in Occupied Poland)*. In addition, the inauguration of the object and the publication of the book took place at around the same time. In her book, the author – making use of the terms 'homelessness' and 'marginalization' – demonstrates the difference between a house and a hide-out. A hide-out is a place in the physical sense, but also a place within the structure of society. It is a place that is a non-place. The essence of a hide-out is therefore its non-visibility, its nowhere-existence, its societal non-existence:

'Hide-outs inscribed themselves in the category of an unwanted, negatively characterized, troublesome space. [...] They were places ascribed to a stigmatized group in society and at the same time they represented the next, transitional phase from the pre-war existence of Jews in the public space to their complete disappearance. [...] The unstable status of those in hiding as illegal, in need of help, deprived of any rights and resources deciding about their power and place in the societal hierarchy, opened up various, mostly negative, perspectives for the inhabitants of the hide-outs' (Cobel-Tokarska, 2012, pp. 123–124).⁹

As a Christian from the region of Lubaczów put it: 'Those, who decided to go into hiding, fared badly, i.e., with a bullet in their head in a ditch at the side of the road' (Mach, n.d.).

There were different types of hide-outs: temporary and long-term, those with assistance and those without, individual and collective ones, those in rural and urban areas and those located in a no-man's land. Whether better or worse, a hide-out is the quintessence of marginalization, homelessness, perishability, rootlessness and a permanent threat of being denounced as a 'Jew', which meant death. Usually, hide-outs meant a lucrative business for those on the outside. For those on the inside: a place of exploitation, blackmail, hunger and thirst, baking hot or cold beyond endurance, a place characterized by the lack of air, humidity, stench, fear, crime.

⁹ I absolutely do not agree with the following points made by the author: a) the equation of nazism with communism; b) the Holocaustization of the suffering of the political prisoners after 1945; c) the stalinization of the People's Republic of Poland, namely the lack of differentiation in describing the period from 1945 to 1989. Furthermore, I believe that the designation of Polish majority society under the category 'witnesses' to the Holocaust actually covers up more than it reveals or permits us to understand – the same applies to the alternative categorization of the Poles as being simply indifferent to the persecution of the Jews, thereby providing a flawed characterization of Polish-Jewish relations (for a critique of the category of the Polish witness as well as the category of indifference and an alternative terminological suggestion cf. Janicka, 2008, pp. 229–252). In December 2012, during the discussion at Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's seminar at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw, Marta Cobel-Tokarska admitted that the Jewish hide-outs would not have been necessary on such a large scale and in such extreme forms, if it had not been for the attitude of the society's majority. However, this aspect is not considered in her book.

Finally, it is a 'tight and uncomfortable case for the body' (Cobel-Tokarska, 2012, p. 149) and for the psyche not necessarily in conformity with the body. The body of the individual in hiding

'is this "self," a burden reduced to its physical dimensions. One can look at hiding one's "self" as an act of separating separating the mind from the body. The mind must look at its body as if it were a package that one must hide. It cannot count on the package's cooperation – it cannot be compressed, its size cannot be changed. It is hard to control it, it may play a dangerous trick. In spite of being an object, it [the body] has its biological needs. Thus, apart from from hiding it from the sight, hearing and smell of others one still has to take care of at least its basic needs (air, food, water, temperature, excretion). In a hide-out, the individual remains an integrated whole, but is also his own enemy' (Cobel-Tokarska, 2012, p. 151).

The person in hiding wants to rescue something that represents an obstacle to rescue. For the ones in hiding their own body is:

- 'an object of care – one has to hide it;
- a trouble – it has its demands, size, needs;
- a threat – it generates sounds, warmth, noises, so it might betray its presence;
- a currency – often one paid with sex in return for help;
- a burden and a source of suffering – illness in a hide-out;
- a prison – the necessity of hiding one's body, which cannot be "disguised" as non-Jewish. It's all because of the body. Consequently, dreams often occur, for example, about transforming into an animal, whom nobody threatens and which can walk safely wherever it wants to;
- a blessing – the idea of Kiddush Ha-Hayyim, the sanctification of life, was also adhered to in the hide-outs; and therefore the principle of saving one's body, which is a gift from God, at all cost;
- a helper – when it is fit, healthy, strong and does not cause problems – then, for example, one can manage with rebuilding a hide-out, escaping; a stronger [person] may take over power in a group;
- a problem – when natural matters in connection with bodily issues arise. Sex, pregnancy, delivery, death – all of this within the conditions of the hide-out generates unimaginable problems and practical complications' (Cobel-Tokarska, 2012, pp. 151–152).

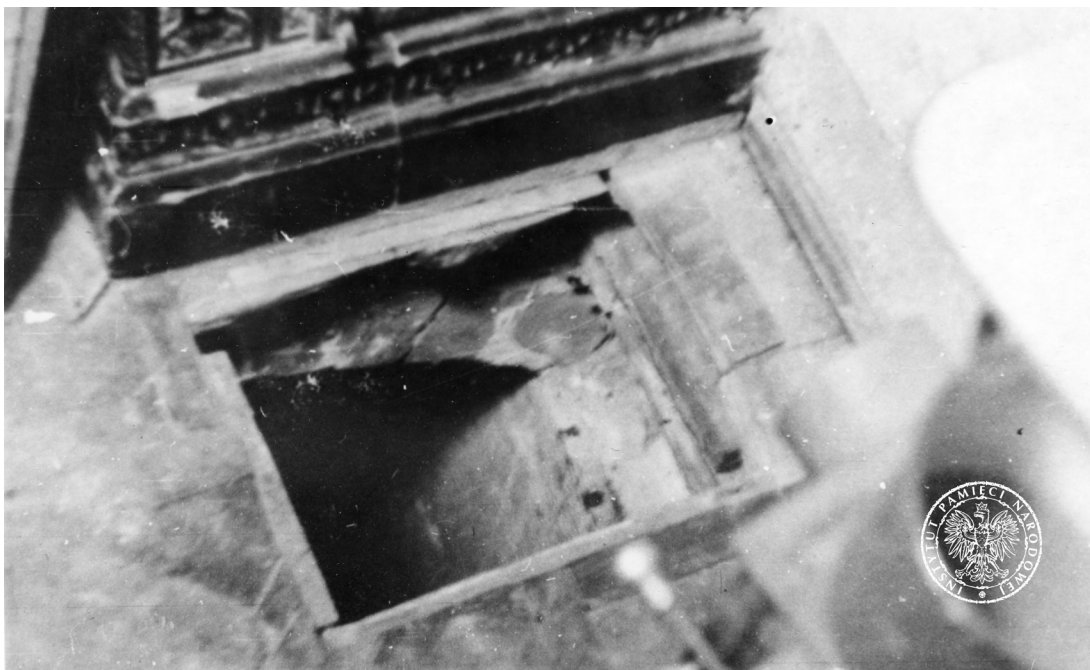
All this – the author concludes – is 'actually not comprehensible for people who did not experience anything similar' (Cobel-Tokarska, 2012, p. 152). They did not succeed in concealing this fact at Źelazna Street. Not even a camouflaging net of stainless steel helped.



'The bunker was under this street' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 54) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22379) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'Entrance to the cellar. Protective plate in front of the oven was nailed to a multi-layered wooden trap-door, thereby sealing off the entrance and rendering it invisible' (Katzmann, 2002, p. 68) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22408) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'Entrance to the cellar' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 69) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22409) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'The entrance hole seen from below' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 69) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22410) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'Beds in the first cellar' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 69) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22411) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'A sleeping place in the cellar' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 72) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22414) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'Entrance to the tunnel. The tunnel was connected to the sewerage system.' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 72) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22418) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'View of the passage to the second cellar' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 70) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22413) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)



'A Jewess, who had still been in hiding under wood in the second cellar' (Katzmann, 2001, p. 72) – photograph from the collection of the Office for the Preservation and Dissemination of Archival Records of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN, BU, GK_22419) (© Copyright by The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation)

Historical re-enactment: close-up

The narrowest house in the world intrigues me with the way it treats Etgar Keret's body. The formulation 'ergonomics to the millimetre' – which repeatedly appears in the press reports – causes doubt as to whether the expected is not transformed here into the predictable. We understand that the writer is not at risk of performing futile, unproductive movements. What room for manoeuvre – if any – does he have then? In comparison with the narrowest house in the world, Le Corbusier's machine for living is a space offering far more freedom and flexibility. The body placed in the settlement joint on Żelazna Street is at every moment subjected to the power of its dispatcher, who almost becomes its disposer. However, this is not everything.

'In the evenings one can expect the effect of a Chinese lantern and a theatre of shadows, when the writer sits on the toilet or takes a shower. The reason being that the whole wall, behind which there is the WC (but also a bedroom, which is 122 cm wide) made of frosted glass – as Jakub Szczęsny revealed' (Bartoszewicz, 2012e, p. 4).

The set WC/shower/bedroom – as a scene of the spectacle – appears under the cover or the pretext of a sense of humour. The comic quality connected to the urogenital system should be linked to the declarative statement (*Keret House: The Logic* by Jakub Szczęsny), which calls for a distance to reality. Culturally speaking, defecation and urination are understood within the category of 'other sexual activities' and performed *en spectacle*. XTube is full of excreting anuses and urinating penises – circumcised or not circumcised; there is a wide variety of shapes, sizes and colours. One is spoilt for choice.

I assume, however, that the reality show on Żelazna Street is not about an erotic stimulus. As a matter of fact, on the first night the writer received a proposition of group sex – a threesome. However, the aphrodisiac in this case proved to be his affiliation to a group considered as exotic, as it was hunters of rare specimens, collectors of curiosities who had made the offer to him. They argued that ‘they had enjoyed previous success with a Chinese, a black man and many others, but never with an Israeli’ (Smoleński & Keret, 2012, p. 16). Indeed, the story of the narrowest house in the world time after time raises serious doubts about the charms of an individual personality.

However, we still do not know the answer to the question about the function of the external eye for which the architect has designed the ‘effect of the Chinese lantern, when the writer sits on the toilet or takes a shower’ or when he is in the bedroom. One can get the impression that this installation is a controller’s eye with the power of surveillance. It seems therefore as if the Keret House contained an element of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon – a building described by Michel Foucault as a total institution (Foucault, 1979). The opposite of the panopticon would be Erving Goffman’s theatre of everyday life, in which, apart from the stage, we have a backstage and many places of retreat which reflect varying levels of publicity and accessibility (Goffman, 1959). In the narrowest house in the world one can hide in the mini-kitchen or the mini-studio. The most intimate activities however were assigned to the front area, visible from the street. The writer (Keret) admitted that he felt like a laureate of *Big Brother* on Żelazna Street. And, in fact, from the current news bulletins we learned that in the writer’s bedroom there was a bed for one person as well as the fact that it measured 90 cm in terms of width. In the end, the lead paragraph of the article entitled ‘Keret with Sultan in mini-house’ informed us that in the writer’s bedroom, on a Sultan mattress which is ‘as much as 90 cm wide’ ‘two persons can sleep comfortably’ (Bartoszewicz, 2012b, 2012c, 2012e). The difference being however that the programme *Big Brother* – just like the majority of prisons, except those under maximum security – where people are exposed 24 hours a day, respect the excreting part as a zone to be protected from the sight of the supervisor. The idea of the narrowest house in the world exploits, if not exposes, the stripping away of intimacy, which in a drastic way also characterized the Jewish hide-outs.

This much one can state by examining the phenomenon on the surface. On a level invisible with the naked eye what we have however is the history of two people on the ‘Aryan side’ caught in a deadly trap. ‘My dad hated crowds,’ Etgar Keret relates, and ‘he said that this was the consequence of the Polish war time hide-outs’ (Smoleński, 2012, p. 25).

‘During the war, Dad hid in some hole in a small Polish town. I don’t know what it was called. It was so small that those who were in hiding could neither stand up nor lie down. They could only sit for many months. When the Russians came and recovered them from below, they suffered from muscular atrophy. Nobody was able to walk’ (Smoleński, 2012, p. 24). Efraim Keret, Etgar’s father, had a sister, called Dana. ‘The Germans killed her, but she did not disclose where the rest of the family was hiding’ (Smoleński & Keret, 2010, p. 46).

We do not know and probably will never find out the circumstances in which Dana was killed. However, as she knew her brother's hiding place, it is conceivable that she hid together with him. The most frequent scenario in the case of those in hiding was the following: before disappearing, they entrusted all of their belongings with Christians in order to withdraw it in tranches with the aim of paying for the help of other Christians. The concern was to minimize the risk and not at the same time to give up one's whole power over oneself to one and the same individual. The belongings were usually distributed throughout many places, with people reckoning that part of their possessions would be seized, while at the same time believing or at least speculating that not all of the confidants would turn out to be thieves. Leaving their hiding places in order to retrieve additional items which belonged to them, and which were held for them, often ended with their being betrayed by trustees. As Jan Grabowski writes: 'the quality of the assistance rendered was so low that the perception of the Christian helpers in the consciousness of those in hiding did not deviate much from the way they perceived the Germans' (Grabowski, 2008, p. 106). He goes on to speak in this context of a 'scheme of behaviour,' which he characterizes as 'depressingly uniform' (Grabowski, 2008, p. 103). Dana could have perished in just such a banal, all too common way. The writer's father survived. After the war he went to Sicily, as a right-wing Zionist and member of the Irgun. He bought weapons from the mafia for the partisans who fought against the British in Palestine. 'He was very happy. It was the first moment in his adult life, when he did not have to hide the fact that he was a Jew' (Smoleński, 2012, p. 24).

Etgar Keret's mother, a resident of Warsaw from an intelligentsia family – 'very assimilated, even more Polish than Jewish' (Smoleński & Keret, 2010, p. 42) – was the only one from her side to survive. Her mother, her father and her brother were murdered on the so-called Aryan side. When her family was still alive, enclosed in the Warsaw ghetto, the girl 'crept into the Aryan side many times in order to get food and medicine' (Smoleński & Keret, 2010, p. 42). 'As a child, she found a way to feed her parents and her small brother. Children were able to get out of the ghetto and to smuggle food back in – through holes through which adults had not the slightest chance of squeezing themselves.' In other words, the writer's mother was one of the children smugglers, one of the potential victims of Frankenstein from Żelazna Street. 'She recognized the name of the street at once [...]. When my Mum smuggled food for the family, in this place one had to avoid the Wachte [it should be *Wache* – E.J.] of the Nazi soldiers. If she had been caught with even only a crumb of bread, they would have killed her on the spot' (Keret, 2012, p. 27).

'To escape was not a problem for her. It was more difficult to survive' (Smoleński, 2012, p. 25). She left the ghetto along with adults. It is on the 'Aryan side' that the following scene took place: 'They escape in a big group but whence and where to, I don't know. One carries on his back a clock, one of those huge cuckoo clocks. [...] They killed him, and the clock was ticking and ticking' or: 'they – Mum, her little brother and her mother – are sitting somewhere in a cabbage field. They are scared because they hear the sounds of the hunt for the Jews. Grandma breastfeeds Mum's little brother, he was crying. The Germans are getting closer. One of them spots Grandma. And he passes by

as if hadn't seen anybody. And he ought to have killed them' (Smoleński & Keret, 2010, p. 44). That however was as far as the miracles went. After the death of her family, the writer's mother was in hiding for a certain period of time at a Polish prostitute's place whose services German clients used. In 1944, 'she was 10 years old; she was travelling in Poland by train and some bastard threw her out. She had broken ribs, pierced lungs, she lost her shoes somewhere. She had to walk about 20 km to the next building with bare feet through the snow.' 'From Mum's narratives it became apparent from time to time that a fork lying close to a plate may in different circumstances be a terrible weapon and that one has to be careful with somebody holding a fork in their hand' (Smoleński & Keret, 2010, p. 44). After the war she never went to Poland again. From Etgar Keret's report we know that before the war she had a happy childhood. Commenting on the remark that 'Felicja' means 'happy' the writer says: 'Mum never used the Polish first name here, only the Hebrew one – Ornah' (Smoleński & Keret, 2010, p. 44).

Seen as re-enactment, the installation on Żelazna Street fulfils yet another defining criterion. As with all historical re-enactments, it does not relate to facts but to current representations of facts. The narrowest house in the world is a hide-out in a demo version – in the show house sense (Shoah house sense?). It is clean, bright, equipped in a modern style. The threat to life is absent. Just like in the picaresque narrative pattern about how Jews were saved in Poland during the Holocaust, which is so popular in Poland. The Germans were easy to trick, and no one was afraid of anybody or anything. The whole village, the whole community, the whole district, the whole city (delete as appropriate) – everybody knew and everybody hid 'his or her Jew.' 'It is as it was.'¹⁰ In addition to that: we have pomp, celebrations, and media fuss. In these narratives, 'our Jew' fulfils the function of a lucky mascot and a ventilation shaft grating. It is an element of camouflage, an exception which prevents us from seeing the rule. It would suffice however to imagine the opposite of each of the parameters of the picaresque narrative and we will receive a reliable picture, which is true to the facts.

'Jewish place'. Visualization

The reference to the Holocaust, as well as the personal history of Etgar Keret's parents, is the most straightforward context of the installation on Żelazna Street in Warsaw; however, it is not the only one. The narrowest house in the world also symbolizes the place of the Jews in Poland. I would like to explain why I persistently use the collective category 'Jews' without delving into the self-identification of those categorized as the 'Jews.' This is part of an attempt to understand and describe Polish majority culture within its own categories. The latter is a culture which is structurally dependent on the category the 'Jews' – essentialized and perceived as diametrically different, in opposition to the

10 Statement made by pope John Paul II after having watched Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Cf. Hugh Davies and Jonathan Petre, 'It is as it was' – Pope's verdict on Christ film, *The Telegraph*, 19 December 2003 – <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/1449877/It-is-as-it-was-Popes-verdict-on-Christ-film.html>

categories 'we,' 'us,' 'ourselves.' 'The Jews' is a category which is constitutive of the mainstream Polish culture: it establishes and organizes the majority's cultural identity. This constitutive function and essentialized construction determines the actuality and stability of the term 'the Jews' – or interchangeably 'the Jew' – which privileges its connotation over its denotation. From the perspective of the culture analysed here, to differentiate between a Jew and an Israeli does not make sense at all. We are entering here the field of incapacitation, of depriving the other of the right to make decisions about oneself, 'since what an individual is, or could be, derives from the place of his kind in the social structure' (Goffman, 1986, p. 112). It is the majority culture that possesses the ultimate decision-making authority with regard to those considered as similar to their kind. Referring to the terms that are external to the cultural idiom described above, the denotation of the category the 'Jews' has to be described in the following way: everybody who is subjected to anti-Semitic violence – physical and symbolic – regardless of their self-identification.

A 'Jewish place' has achieved a cultural representation on Żelazna Street. It has been visualized. It is marked by certain characteristic features. It is a place equivalent to a lack of place. It is a *mise en abyme*, a story within a story: a place where there is no place is situated in a place where there is no place. However, it is not only the lack of space that characterizes its essence. It is also an unsafe place. Settlement joints per definition are not recommended as a place to live, not even temporarily, due to the fact that in such a place there exists a permanent risk: the risk of being crushed. 'An unsafe place' is also a category that Joanna Tokarska-Bakir proposes in order to describe the place of Jews within the Christian culture of Europe:

'In its symbolic narrative, pre-modern anti-Semitism – religious, ethnic, social – assigned to them [to Jews] nothing other than an "unsafe place," which could disappear from the surface of the earth at any moment' (Tokarska-Bakir, 2004b, p. 66).

Thus, according to the author this particular aspect is exactly what pre-modern anti-Semitism has in common with its so-called modern variant.

Finally, this is a place 'in-between.' 'In-between' – *Cwiszn* – is the title of a Jewish quarterly about literature and art edited in Warsaw since 2010. In its successive issues, the journal has given an ongoing characterization of such socio-cultural location of the already non-existent Yiddish civilization in Poland.¹¹ *Pomiędzy (In-between)* is also the title of a book by Agnieszka Jagodzińska on the acculturation of Warsaw Jews in the second half of the 19th century (Jagodzińska, 2008). The final result of this process consisted in reaching an invisible, mental border in the form of the lack of acceptance on

11 In the issue entitled *Humor żydowski itepe* (Jewish humour and the like) one can read: 'Szolem-Alejchem's works are swarming with people who live in train compartments where they strike up occasional acquaintances [...], people who spend a bit too much time in cheap hotels and at railway stations. In addition to that, the literary persona of Szolem Alejchem appears in constant movement. He is a deterritorialized creature in many respects. Not only does he not have a *locum* of his own and is often seen in train compartments or as an unwelcome guest but he also does not really belong – mentally and linguistically – neither to society, which is the object of his work, nor to the one, in which he would like to be treated as a subject. His very first name, Szolem-Alejchem, means as much as the greeting "Peace be with You" or "Welcome" and indicates a state of eternal journey because "szolem-alejchem" is not addressed to neighbours or close friends. This greeting is reserved for a stranger, for somebody who arrives from afar' (Miron, 2013, p. 8).

the part of the target culture. Helena Datner, researching the Jewish intelligentsia in Warsaw in the second half of the 19th century, captured the matter more sharply by referring to the realities of the ghetto and the nomenclature of the Holocaust. She described a world, in which the category 'Jew' – used in a stigmatizing way – was not a descriptive category but an axiological category, and was ascribed to the individual once and for all. Datner's work is entitled *Ta i tamta strona (This and that Side)* (Datner, 2007). It was these terms that were used to describe the ghetto and the 'Aryan side' in the first half of the 1940s. With no room 'in-between.' Although, of course, if one wished to, one could sit down with one leg in each side of the no man's land of broken glass and barbed wire crowning the wall. In her work *Syn będzie Lech (Your son's name will be Lech)*, Anna Landau-Czajka wrote about the assimilated Jews in the inter-war period in Poland as 'the third nation,' not accepted by the Polish community (Landau-Czajka, 2006).

'In-between' is not only the condition of the Polish intelligentsia of Jewish origin. It is also the topos of a 'Jewish place' in general. The allegorical Jew described by Władysław Szlengel in his poem *Cyrk (The Circus)* hangs and flounders around (*plącze się* and *pęta się*) on the European scene 'in-between': trapped in-between the acts of power games, in-between the legs of real actors and authors of real events (Szlengel, 1977, pp. 100–102). Szlengel himself was stuck in-between – in the most literal sense of the word. In the Large Ghetto he was living on the very border itself. He was dying on that side – with his eye fixed on this side. 'In-between' – on the front line, in the artillery crossfire – ends the course of the 'train of life' transporting emblematic Jews



Zug des Lebens – DVD cover of Radu Mihaileanu's film *Train of Life* (1998). Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka

with a fiddler on the roof (of a cattle wagon) in Radu Mihaileanu's film. The DVD menu of the film exposes in the background clouds of smoke. At the end we hear the story of a jester/madman (Yiddish: *meshuge*) from behind the barbed wire of an extermination camp. *Le fou* in French means both madman and jester. The French title of this comical comedy – *Train de vie* (1988) – means 'train of life' but likewise 'way of living.' (Indeed, in Germany, Mihaileanu's comedy was promoted as comical. On the German cover of the DVD it says: *Intelligent, sensibel und komisch!*).

'In-between': innocent sounding. So, why not indeed? However, all this takes place in a culture, in which belonging as well as identity are moral qualities and values, forming part of the domain of axiology. To be outside a group or between groups is considered at least morally suspect, if not completely unacceptable. At the same time in Poland – with regard to individuals categorized as belonging to the group 'the Jews' – there is no talk of becoming an accepted part of the community, since even complete polonization does not amount to the removal of the stigma and an end to exclusion. The system is equally based on a lack of alternatives within the sphere of identity as well as incapacitation, i.e., on the deprivation of the right of those who are stigmatized to make decisions about themselves. This lack of alternative was succinctly captured by an observer of today's Poland: 'here is Either-Or, / Either one is Here – Or one is Here.' And if 'one is Here' is pre-established, i.e. this is not down to the individual's choice' (Keff, 2008, p. 13). In this situation, admission into the majority community can only be granted conditionally and depends on the successful completion of an ongoing, indeed unending test of subordination. The responsibility of the aspirants, however, remains a collective one, no matter what action is taken on the part of an individual.

One can get an idea of what all this means by reading the comments in the liberal mainstream press regarding the application for Polish citizenship on the part of the American journalist Anne Applebaum. The matter was considered a major event. One of the weekly opinion formers wrote: 'There is much to indicate that we will shortly gain a first class female citizen' (mf, 2012, p. 14) – despite the fact that the Polish law does not provide for hierarchical grades of citizenship. The formulation looks like a slip of the pen based on the confusion of citizenship and civic honours for services rendered. Indeed, decorations are awarded within different ranks: golden, silver, bronze, I class, II class, V class. In another weekly opinion maker, a doyen of Polish intelligentsia, someone with the status of moral authority within Polish public life, a former Auschwitz prisoner, a former member of the Council for Aid to Jews (*Żegota*), a Righteous among the Nations, also makes reference to the rhetoric of merit, reward, and praise:

'I think that [Anne Applebaum – E.J.] most certainly deserves Polish citizenship. She is raising her two sons as Poles. [...] For it is the mother who decides on the most sensitive issues, and especially in the case of such a strong-minded and tough person as Ms Anne Applebaum. [...] However, what is of equal importance is the significance of her decision in relation to the stereotype about Poland within the Jewish milieu in America, and not only there. Anti-Semitism in Poland exists, and it is very strong, but this is not the essence of Polishness nor is it the essence of the Polish state. In the meantime, according to the stereotype Poland is terrible and there is nothing worth pursuing here for a Jew. Anne Applebaum, by claiming Polish

citizenship, shows something completely different, namely that a Jew does have something to pursue here, as it's her personal choice to become a citizen of this state. Indeed, the fact remains that her sons could be brought up as Jews, and in keeping with Israeli law they could claim Israeli citizenship as sons of a Jewish mother. Instead, she is raising them as Poles' (Michalski & Bartoszewski, 2012, pp. 18–19).

From this argument it follows that Anne Applebaum is a lifelong hostage of her son's conduct and choices.¹² It also raises doubts as to whether a person whose gender is mother" ('osoba płci matka') (Masłowska, 2005, p. 175) who does not raise her children 'as Poles' may hold Polish citizenship. Fathers, we assume, do not participate in the upbringing of children. However, what about those among Polish citizens – assuming that men nevertheless may occasionally appear – who raise their children 'as Jews,' 'as Roma,' 'as Russians,' 'as Germans,' 'as Lemkos' and so on? What about those who raise their children 'as nothing,' i.e. outside any categories? Human rights, the right to citizenship, political community, social contract are dead letters. They are considered abstract and most often perceived as foreign – if not hostile – in the culture that is predominant in Poland. The press material is adorned by a photograph of a smiling Anne Applebaum over a plate of dumplings with pork scratchings.

The curators of the narrowest house in the world believe that the object 'will become an important symbol of contemporary Warsaw' (statement by Sarmen Beglarian and Sylwia Szymaniak, cit. after Bartoszewicz, 2012b, p. 1). Maybe then the installation on Żelazna Street only looks like a historical re-enactment but isn't a historical re-enactment? Maybe what we have here is not history, which repeats itself as farce, but history which cannot end? History with hostages and potential victims. The same. Constantly. All the time. If so, the narrowest house in the world symbolizes and visualizes the order, which in Polish culture is constantly being validated. An order, which is obvious and transparent – nameless and by the same token invisible. Given the fact that it would not occur to anybody to protest, one can announce (threaten?):

'By the time Keret has had his fill of writing and has worn himself out in the narrowest house in the world, he will have to repay the Poles for their hospitality in Poland. Nothing is for free, not even in the homeland of one's parents. He will become the chairperson of a jury to be in charge of an international resident programme in the settlement joint. The aim: to attract artists of the world, to advertize Warsaw widely, to bring in artistic fermentation' (Bartoszewicz, 2012c, p. 27).

'He will have to repay the Poles for their hospitality in Poland.' 'Nothing is for free.' Déjà vu. One's skin crawls. The narrowest house in the world came into being with the notion of Etgar Keret and 'artists of the whole world' who 'shall come to Warsaw in order to get to know its history and culture, and dedicate to the city their work' (Bartoszewicz 2012e, p. 4). The chosen place, it has to be admitted, is perfectly suited to this purpose. At ground level there are two pawnshops as well as a shop specializing in baptismal costumes, and one can listen to klezmer music here day and night.

12 For further observations on the sensitive and thorny issue of mothers and their origin in Polish culture the reader is referred to the text by Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Podjejrzone pochodzenie jako kategoria kultury polskiej (Suspect Origin as a Category of Polish Culture)* (Grudzińska-Gross, 2012, pp. 163–185).



Jeweller. Gold. Silver – 22 Chłodna Street, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka



Fragment of the advertisement for Lombard (a pawnshop) and *skup złota* (purchasers of gold) – Żelazna Street, corner of Chłodna Street, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka



Lombard Złoto ("Pawnshop Gold") – 22 Chłodna Street, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka



Shop with baptismal costumes – 22 Chłodna Street, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka

Algorithm and protocol

On Żelazna Street in Warsaw the 'Polish eye' designs and sets up a 'Jewish place' in the spatial and symbolic sense. The production or rather reproduction of a well-known stage design activates a ready-made social script with a specific form of distribution of roles and choreography. This can be seen for example in Wojciech Gerson's painting *Kazimierz Wielki i Żydzi* (*Casimir the Great and the Jews*, 1874), or in Jan Matejko's painting *Przyjęcie Żydów w Polsce w 1096 roku* (*The Reception of the Jews into Poland*, 1889), or in Henryk Hochman's grace-evoking bas-relief *Przyjęcie Żydów do Polski w średniowieczu* (*The Reception of the Jews into Poland in the Middle Ages*, 1907) featuring a winged angel wearing the crown of the last king of the Piast dynasty – Casimir the Great – symbolizing Poland. What strikes one is the confusion involved in establishing the dates of the mythical arrival – an event, which is the object of intensive commemoration, if not cult practices. In this hospitality competition, Władysław I Herman (ca 1043-1102) with his sons Bolesław Krzywousty (1086-1138) and Zbigniew (d. after 1114) surpasses Casimir the Great (1310-1370). The legendary reception of Jews moves back in time. What is important, however, is the fact that the scene looks good and fits perfectly with absolutely everything. This is also the case on Żelazna Street. Here we have the host ceremonially cutting the ribbon and receiving the guest, who arrives on his doorstep. The host not only gives shelter to the harassed wanderer, he also offers him a gift. On the whole, everybody is vying with one another to display politeness. Starring as King Casimir the Great is the mayor of the city of Warsaw, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz.

The effect was additionally reinforced by Etgar Keret's comment on the nuclear threat to Israel on the part of Iran: 'We are scared, so we are looking for a solution that could save us. It is best to be outside the ghetto wall – at least having someone we can trust there' (Smoleński & Keret, 2012, p. 17). The receiver context, the Polish dominant culture, intersects this message without difficulty and gives it a meaning comprehensible within its own categories. According to this logic, Israel is a ghetto, in which the Jews have locked themselves in. On the outside, the 'Ayran side,' or more specifically the 'Ayran' Polish side, is waiting with open arms. Only Ornah Keret's stance does not subscribe to this reasoning: 'Mum is not scared. She would never leave Israel, she did not come here after the Holocaust to leave this place' (Smoleński & Keret, 2012, p. 17).

If we look at this scenario through the glasses of Polish majority culture both paternalism and moral-emotional blackmail which constitute the quintessence of the iconic figure, remain invisible. Indeed, even declared critics of anti-Semitism do not see this. The initiator of the most important debate on this topic during the 1980s in Poland wrote: 'We received the Jews into our house, but we ordered them to live in the basement' (Błoński, 2010, p. 1087). King Casimir the Great, Poland – we, the Poles. The ahistorical, falsified image eliminates the concrete historical reality and prevents a reflection in political, economic and legal terms. Thus, the whole spectacle proceeds according to a firmly established and well-rehearsed script. The inscription of the installation on



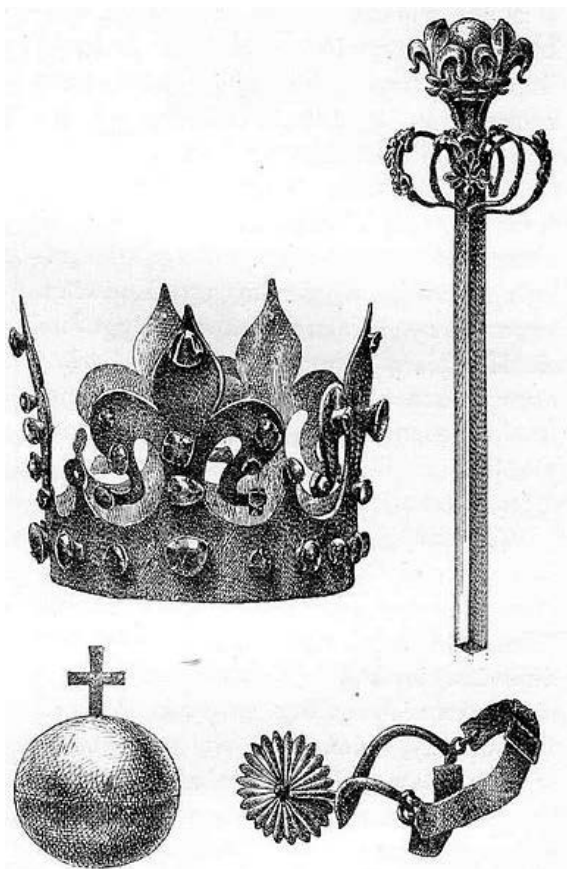
Wojciech Gerson (1831-1901), *Casimir the Great and the Jews* (1874); the painting is also called *The Reception of the Jews* or *Wandering Jews asking Casimir the Great for shelter in Poland* (on the left against the background of the building the king with his entourage, next to him the prince with a falcon), oil on canvas; dimensions: 118 x 144, inventory nr. MP 2035 (© Copyright by The National Museum in Warsaw, photograph: Jerzy Andrzejewski)



Jan Matejko (1838-1893), *The Reception of the Jews into Poland in 1096* (1889), from the cycle *History of Civilization in Poland* (prince Władysław Herman surrounded by his family in the background of the cathedral and the castle in Płock), oil on canvas; size 76 x 112, inventory nr. MP 133 (© Copyright by the National Museum in Warsaw, photograph: Piotr Ligier)



Henryk Herschel Hochman, *The Reception of the Jews into Poland in the Middle Ages* (1907) – a relief at the ancient town hall, Wolnica Square, Cracow, January 2013. The inscription beneath the title reads: Plaque donated by the Jewish community of Cracow, sculptured by Henryk Hochman in 1907. Removed during the Second World War by the German Nazi occupier, returned by the city of Cracow in 1996. Photograph: Łukasz Biedka



Casimir the Great's grave insignia according to the *Encyklopedia staropolska ilustrowana* (Illustrated Old Polish Encyclopedia) by Zygmunt Gloger (Gloger, 1902, p. 39)



Etgar Keret and Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz during the inauguration of the narrowest house in the world; behind the building on the left is the symbolic reconstruction of the footbridge over Chłodna Street (the four green pillars) – intersection of Żelazna and Chłodna Streets, 20 October 2012. Photograph: PAP/Grzegorz Jakubowski (© Copyright by PAP)



Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Etgar Keret, Jakub Szczęsny during the inauguration of the Keret House, 20 October 2012. Photograph: mwmedia (© Copyright by mwmedia).

Żelazna Street in the logic of hospitality and gift renews the algorithm of symbolic violence. On the one hand we have 'host.' On the other we have 'guest.' The 'guest,' however, is faced with an alternative. Either he proves himself 'the good Jew,' who accepts the place allotted to him with gratitude, or he refuses, thereby proving himself 'the insolent Jew': 'calculating,' 'ungrateful,' if not outright 'vindictive.' In both cases the Polish majority narrative about so-called Polish-Jewish relations throughout history is confirmed. The legendary 'hospitality' of Poles for Jews, functioning as a framework category establishing the parameters of the debate, falsifies reality and does not allow us to perceive the relation of domination and submission, and consequently the long history of anti-Semitic violence – by far not only symbolic.

Being a guest requires politeness, tact, good manners, good taste as well as further etiquette.¹³ On 23 October I received an e-mail from an acquaintance who belongs to the so-called second generation, i.e., the children of those who survived the Holocaust – the Holocaust Children's children. The letter concerned the narrowest house in the world. The author asked me not to publish his personal details:

'Hey! How do you like the idea of the solemn ritual placing of a Jew in a hiding-place? Supposedly, it will occur every year. They will seek volunteers among sabras [Israelis born in Israel, E.J.], because sabras do not get it. In the diaspora there were no volunteers...

This time a model of a hiding-place between the walls – the model "Amsterdam" – is being tested. However, supposedly, conceptual work is underway on a hiding-place within layers of a roof in the remaining ghetto houses on Grzybowska Street. Next year they will place Amos Oz in there.

I was flabbergasted. You understand that I cannot say all that aloud. Out of this politeness. And out of fear that I am criticizing just for the sake of criticizing while everyone is having a great time.

Regards,

Ł.'

Etgar Keret's father, asked by a person from Poland, if he longed for Poland, referred to the Polish intelligentsia's notion of good manners – so exotic in Israel – and politely replied in the language of the Polish intelligentsia: 'Not particularly.'¹⁴ The conversation took place at the beginning of the 21st century at Ornah and Efraim Keret's house during a festive five o'clock. At that moment Efraim Keret did not look like a father who had ran away with the circus. He gave the impression as if he had run away from the circus and – employing his repertoire of verbal acrobatics – tried hard not to become involved with it again. The career of the euphemism 'not particularly' is an interesting phenomenon in itself. Asked in 2012, 'Why did you hide your Jewishness for so many years?', a well-known female reporter and biographer answered: 'Because my mother did this for many years. [...] Almost unconsciously, I adopted her Aryan papers. I also

13 On the requirement of politeness in the face of the Holocaust cf. Żukowski, 2010, pp. 38–55.

14 Cf. the film *W poszukiwaniu utraconych lat* (In Search of the Lost Years) (2002), directed by Jan Sosiński, based on the screenplay by Piotr Pytlakowski and Michał Sobelman. Katarzyna Groniec talks to Ornah and Efraim Keret.

felt, although never aggressively, that it is not particularly good to be a Jew in Poland' (Grzebałkowska & Tuszyńska, 2012, p. 13). It's better not to even think about what would happen, if it weren't for the etiquette.

The Etgar Keret House has become a tourist attraction in Warsaw. In addition to individual visitors it also attracts school groups. Some compare it to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. The object, however, is in keeping with the so-called Polish national tradition of offering physical places to artists who are considered to have rendered particularly outstanding services to the so-called national culture. Indeed, Henryk Sienkiewicz received a manor house in Oblęgorek, Maria Konopnicka – a manor house in Żarnowiec, Stefan Żeromski – an apartment in the Royal Castle in Warsaw, Etgar Keret – a cranny in the Muranów district of Warsaw. The latter being a gift encapsulating our representation of ourselves. As the press put it: the writer 'was anointed caretaker, ambassador and tenant of the house' (Bartoszewicz, 2012e, p. 4). That's not all, Etgar Keret, already before a 'cult' figure in Poland, was promoted to the rank of 'a Polish writer in exile' (Bartoszewicz, 2012c, p. 27).¹⁵ A greater compliment and a more significant ennoblement is hard to imagine in a culture that remains to this day incapable of inventing something more attractive society-wide than the martyrological-heroic paradigm. In this sense, the Keret House is part of a wider phenomenon, which one can consider as an act of philo-Semitic violence (Janicka & Żukowski, 2012), philo-Semitic with regard to the intentions of the perpetrators.

Further layers of mystified sense overlap each other, creating a coherent and logical totality – a totality labelled as *The Logic*. However, perhaps – instead of turning one's nose up at this phenomenon and criticizing just for the sake of criticizing – one should place the matter within the context of the socio-cultural norm and say something along the lines of: 'In comparison with the realities of the occupation, this is not so bad'; 'For Etgar Keret, this not so bad' or 'For Poland this is not so bad.' On the one hand indeed, not so bad. On the other however, despite everything, 'not particularly.' One can of course refer to the absence of place as a place, and the negation of a house as a house. One can even speak of a gift and of return. That allows people to camouflage the actual state of affairs. Only from whom and for how long? Sooner or later questions will emerge, such as what happened to the apartment of Etgar Keret's mother. We know that it was situated on Aleje Jerozolimskie (Jerusalem Avenue), not far away from Nowy Świat Street – 'a very good Warsaw address.' Financially speaking: how much was it worth? How did the act of expropriating the apartment from its rightful owners play out? (Usually, a concierge accompanied by the Polish police participated in such an action). Who lived there afterwards? What about the right of ownership? What about res-

15 The phrase was first used by Ornah Keret, albeit its Israeli context is lost to the Polish audience. The inscription 'Polish writer' on Leo Lipski's tombstone in Yarkon cemetery, Petah Tikvah, lays bare that there is nothing sentimental about the term, nor is it a point of pride for Polish majority culture (finding the writer's grave would not have been possible without the invaluable help from Tadeusz Woleński, a true master of interlinguistic navigation and intercultural translation). Another 'Polish writer' was Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose existence Polish culture had ignored until he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature and then for years his works were translated into Polish – from English... In view of this, an interesting material for analysis is posed by the sentence: 'Isaac Singer was, however, sometimes referred to internationally as a Polish writer' (Błtoński, 2008, p. 80).



Leo Lipski's grave. The Hebrew inscription says: 'Here rests Leo Lipschütz, Lipski, the son of Szmuel and Tonia, writer [Hebrew: sofer], 1917-1997'. The Polish inscription says: 'Leo Lipschütz, Lipski, Polish writer, 1917-1997' – Yarkon cemetery, Petah Tikvah, February 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka

titution or compensation? A similar set of questions concerns the house of the family of Etgar Keret's father and the apartments and houses belonging to the writer's relatives, close and distant. Not to mention the remaining property – movable and immovable.

Taking into consideration the largely unrealistic categories which are usually used to narrate anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in Poland, one can get the impression that only the conversion of this history into money would be capable of making the institutions that transmit cultural patterns sanctified by tradition – the family, public education at all levels, the Church – realize that this transmission is no longer possible. It is no longer possible at least with regard to the costs, at least in the financial sense of this word – as they know no other language. In the meantime however, things are the way they are. One can see that for oneself on Żelazna Street. On the one hand we have so-called Polish-Polish property. On the other hand we have so-called Polish post-Jewish property (*pożydowska*). And a cramped and suffocating emptiness in the middle. The location and form of the narrowest house in the world clearly indicate who governs and controls the situation, who defines the terms and dictates the principles. And who acts in whose play.

Sense of humour and the Polish cause

Within the dominant culture which produced the category of 'Jewish writer with a sense of humour' sense of humour is a conditional requirement, and at the same time a sanctioning and regulating device. The category shapes the entire narrative about the person and the group that he or she is ascribed to. What is the point of this? Looking at it from

the perspective of power relations and the way societal communication is organized, the phenomenon is played out between the carrier of a stigma and the normals. 'Carrier of stigma' and 'normals' are categories established by Erving Goffman, who developed a theory about the process of stigmatization according to which a stigma is neither an individual nor a collective attribute but a pathological societal interaction, caused by the manner in which a particular attribute is perceived. Goffman provides an analysis of the relation between attribute and stereotype. He also distinguishes various strategies of what he calls 'stigma management.' The latter demands from the stigmatized person the cultivation of distance from himself, which *de facto* means looking at oneself from the perspective of that of the normals. In effect, in addition to taking care of oneself, this constellation imposes on the stigmatized individuals the duty of caring for the normals.

'Slights, snubs, and untactful remarks should not be answered in kind. [...] When the stigmatized person finds that normals have difficulty in ignoring his failing, he should try to help them and the social situation by conscious efforts to reduce the tension. In these circumstances the stigmatized individual may, for example, attempt to "break the ice," explicitly referring to his failing in a way that shows he is detached, able to take his condition in stride. In addition to matter-of-factness, levity is also recommended' (Goffman, 1986, p. 116).¹⁶

Apart from sense of humour, cultural constructs such as tact and good manners play a role. All of them fulfil the function of restraining oneself:

'It depends upon normals not being pressed to the point at which they can easily extend acceptance – or, at worst, uneasily extend it. The stigmatized are tactfully expected to be gentlemanly and not to press their luck; they should not test the limits of the acceptance shown to them, nor make it the basis for still further demands. [...] The nature of a "good adjustment" is now apparent. It requires that the stigmatized individual cheerfully and unselfconsciously accepts himself as essentially the same as normals, while at the same time he voluntarily withholds himself from those situations in which normals would find it difficult to give lip service to their similar acceptance of him. [...] A *phantom acceptance* is thus allowed to provide the base for a *phantom normalcy*' (Goffman, 1986, pp. 121–122 – emphasis in original).

The code of conduct, which obligates the bearer of the stigma to protect the normals, is only an outward reversal of roles and therefore an illusion disguising the fact that the stigma bearer is trapped in an instrumental situation. It is – just as all other guidelines for being accepted – 'inspired by the normals' (Goffman, 1986, p. 119). What is at stake in the game is the conservation of the *status quo* established by the normals; it implies that they can remain 'relatively unthreatened in their identity beliefs' (Goffman, 1986, p. 121).

One of the methods of stigma management is minstrelization, namely a situation, in which the stigmatized person acts out before normals the very set of characteristic features which are ascribed to his kind, thereby 'consolidating a life situation into a clownish role':¹⁷

16 Goffman refers to John H. Burma's article *Humour as a Technique in Race Conflict* (Burma, 1946, pp. 710–715).

17 'Minstrelization' is a term, which Goffman adopts from Anatole Broyard's article *Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro. How Prejudice Distorts the Victim's Personality*, in: *Commentary X* (Broyard, 1950, pp. 59–60). 'A conscious effort at fully playing the role is involved, sometimes termed "impersonation"' (Goffman, 1986, p. 110, footnote 12).

[T]he cripple must be careful not to act differently from what people expect him to do. [...] they will become suspicious and insecure if the cripple falls short of these expectations. It is rather strange, but the cripple has to play the part of the cripple, just as many women have to be what the men expect them to be, just women; and the Negroes often have to act like clowns in front of the “superior” white race, so that the white man shall not be frightened by his black brother’ (Carling, 1962, pp. 54-55, cited in: Goffman, 1986, p. 110).

Władysław Szlengel expressed this in the language of poetry as follows:

‘For your grace, Sirs –
For your superiority and pride –
We wear masks the whole year
and poor, clownish costumes...’¹⁸

To play one’s role and to keep one’s place does not preclude the disclosure of the historically constructed norm and the societal ritual which it generates – under the condition that all of this takes place within the spheres of humour and entertainment, thanks to which it remains both unpunished and non-binding: the order is not disturbed. Goffman calls this ‘sad pleasure’ and points out that ‘this kind of joking by the stigmatized does not so much demonstrate some kind of chronic distance the individual has from himself as it demonstrates the more important fact that a stigmatized person is first of all like anyone else, trained first of all in others’ views of persons like himself [...]’ (Goffman, 1986, p. 134).

The conceptualization of the so-called Jewish condition often takes place by means of referring to the figure of the court jester, village madman, circus clown or cabaret artist. This is the case with the above mentioned poems *Cyrk (The Circus)* and *Maska Purymowa (Purim Mask)* by Szlengel and with the film *Train de vie (Train of Life)* by Mihaileanu. Both communiqués were issued in the sphere of entertainment – cabaret and filmic comedy respectively. Pierre Birnbaum writes of Jews as jesters – in the meaning of mad and unpredictable exponents – of least popular or completely lost causes (referring to Birnbaum’s theses cf. Zawadzki, 2010, p. 223). In Christian Europe, within the category of stigmatized persons there appeared ‘people who were at the very bottom of the societal hierarchy or occupying ambivalent positions, situated between categories,’ for example jesters, acrobats, minstrels and vagrants (Tokarska-Bakir, 2007, p. 16). In the Middle Ages, the Jewish stigma was doubled; Jews were additionally stigmatized by means of a harlequin dress. This is why one can connect Szlengel with Mihaileanu. Both tried to describe the situation of people playing the role of jesters and acrobats, if not people playing the role of jesters and acrobats playing the role of jesters and acrobats (Grynberg, 2012b, pp. 74–75) – artists in residence on guest performances, offered permanent temporary accommodation on a disinfectant mat.

Sense of humour is a serious matter. The lack thereof, even if only temporary, puts you in danger. This becomes apparent in Etgar Keret’s description of the narrowest house in the world:

18 „Z waszej, Panowie[,] łaski – / dla waszej wyższości i dumy – / nosimy rok cały maski / i nędzne, błazeńskie kostiumy...” (Szlengel, 2013, pp. 105–106). I thank Anna Zawadzka for drawing my attention to this poem.

'On a picture it looks a bit as if history did not leave a place for a house, but it nevertheless pushed itself in forcefully, saying: there was once a family that lived in this area, they no longer live here, but everybody who passes by, will have to agree to it, will have to look at my slim body, crammed within [...]' (Keret, 2012, p. 27).

'Pushing itself in forcefully.' 'A body crammed within and crammed into the space.' Not good. However, in the bog of reality a lifebelt of pathetic universalization floats around: the ultimate guilty party for this tragedy is history – unspecified and impersonal. As Marek Edelman used to say when it came to not making insults in public: '[The Jews] died from the hands of these and others, we will not speak about this in detail' (Błoński, Edelman, Miłosz, & Turowicz, 2011, p. 39).¹⁹ Meticulousness does not make sense even more so because the double nelson to which the Polish culture subjected the 'Jewish writer with a sense of humour' works properly. I use the term 'double nelson' here in order to indicate the double lack of room for manoeuvre – literally (with regard to the body) and in a figurative sense (with regard to the mind). In as much as the writer's body is 'crammed within and crammed into the space' his mind however issues communiqués which are in agreement with the dominant socio-cultural norm. 'The Jewish writer with a sense of humour' does his best in order to repay the hospitality experienced in Poland:

'Well, admittedly, this house is really not too spacious, supposedly the narrowest in the world, but always a house. And I am moved, because my family did not have a house in Warsaw for more than 70 years' (Keret, 2012, p. 27).

'Great. No claustrophobia, perhaps a bit like in a submarine [...]. [...] I did not feel like a writer but like a politician or a guy who won *Big Brother*, a celebrity. TV stations from Japan and Canada, Americans from the *New York Times*, Germans, French and Poles – all of them simply wanted to see me in this house. A happening: how can one live in something like that. [...]

However, this is not only about the narrowest house in the world and a happening of the sort of the Guinness world record. Neither is it about me. What is important is to attract the finest artists of the world to Warsaw, because Poland and Warsaw can have the greatest as their guests. Murakami, Tom Waits, simply everyone' (Smoleński & Keret, 2012, p. 16).

The Le Corbusier house was a machine for living in. 'The house that crams one in' is akin to a torture machine, understood as a machine for the production of a narrative in the context of the field of jurisdiction. Physical torture, even though spectacular, was however neither the goal nor the purpose of the installation. Its goal and purpose was the production of 'truth'. The owner of the means of production determines the content and the form of 'truth,' namely the parameters of the final product. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir explains this mechanism in her text *Ganz Andere? Żyd jako czarownica i czarownica jako Żyd...* (*Ganz Andere? Jew as Witch and Witch as Jew*), which is based on a comparative analysis of testimonies produced in the so-called witch trials and the trials for alleged ritual murder. The author demonstrates the production of truth by using an example taken from the work *Endingen Judenspiel* (1883). The fragment analyzed by Tokarska-

19 In an editorial note on page 53 the editors of the volume write that the journal *Tygodnik Powszechny* first published Jan Błoński's, Marek Edelman's, Czesław Miłosz' and Jerzy Turowicz' conversation in 2005 in issue 18 (2912) of the journal. The conversation itself – conducted in the library of the publisher *Znak* – dates back to the year 1994.

-Bakir is taken from a record of interrogation of an adherent of Judaism named Merckly, who in 1462 was accused of having murdered a Christian family.

‘Merckly, while subjected to torture, groped for the right answer to the questions that were put to him. “At first he declared – we are reading – that the Jews need Christian blood for medical purposes because it is exceptionally beneficial. However, this answer did not satisfy us and we replied to him by saying that he is lying ... to which he replied that it is necessary against leprosy. In view of that we asked: «Why is your son a leper?»; we did not accept his answer. To that the Jew Merckly further testified that Jews need Christian blood in view of its fragrance because they smell terribly themselves. This answer we did not accept either.” Only the answer “Jews need Christian blood for the *crisam* [the term *crisam* used here is a specific Christian name for a Christian holy oil – J. T.-B.] during circumcision,” satisfied the inquisitors. All three answers – the first about blood as antidote for leprosy, the second about the substance getting rid of the *foetor judaicus* and the third about *crisam* are obvious Christian prejudices; the specific Christian vocabulary used by the Jew engaged in self-accusation, is also a testament to these prejudices [...]’ (Tokarska-Bakir, 2004a, p. 131).

In a technical sense, a torture machine is a machine for the (re)production of a given narrative pattern. It is difficult not to think about this sphere of connotation concerning the narrowest house in the world, when its ‘ambassador and tenant’ proclaims: ‘The most important thing is that I finally return to Poland – not as a tourist but home’ (Bartoszewicz, 2012e, p. 4). This sounds like the testimony of a Crown-witness of Polish self-defence in the trial of Poland and Poles before the highest tribunal of *The New York Times*. ‘The house that crams one within’ squeezed out testimony from a body subjected to pressure to deliver King’s evidence confirming Polish innocence: *regina probationis*.

That’s enough on the subject of ‘a Jewish writer with a sense of humour.’



The interior of the narrowest house in the world – 26 October 2012. Photograph: Bartek Warzecha (© Copyright by Bartek Warzecha)



Etgar Keret enters the narrowest house in the world – 22 October 2012. Photograph: Bartek Warzecha (© Copyright by Bartek Warzecha)



Etgar Keret in the narrowest house in the world – 21 October 2012. Photograph: Bartek Warzecha (© Copyright by Bartek Warzecha)



Etgar Keret in the narrowest house in the world, on the shelf is a miniature of the narrowest house in the world – 22 October 2012. Photograph: Bartek Warzecha (© Copyright by Bartek Warzecha)

Emergency procedure

What about a ‘Jewish writer without a sense of humour?’ If this is a ‘Jewish writer’ at all! (just between you and me). Such Ida Fink for example. In her short story *Schron* (*The Shelter*) we find a description of a visit by two survivors to a family who – with the money they had received from the former for having hidden them – built a new house. The ‘hosts’ show the ‘guests’ around the building:

‘We began in the kitchen, then we went into the living room, the bedroom, and another room for the son who had returned from the army. We thought they had shown us everything, but then they said, “And we kept you in mind, too. Here, take a look!”

The husband pushed aside a wardrobe and I looked – a white, blank wall. But when he went down and touched the floor, I grabbed Olek’s hand. I didn’t see anything yet, but the gesture was familiar. He lifted a red, waxed board and told us to look closely. “There, now, just in case something happens, you won’t have to roost like chickens, a shelter as pretty as a picture, with all the comforts!” I leaned over and saw stairs leading down into a small, dark room, without any windows or doors. It had two beds, two chairs, and a table’ (Fink, 1995, pp. 133–134).²⁰

How do the laureates of the shelter respond? They are shocked and shaken. The man says: ‘[I]t was as if I were kneeling above my own grave... Horrible...’ The woman cries.

²⁰ I thank Tomasz Żukowski for referring me to the writer, in particular to the story cited above. Anna Zawadzka wrote about the shelter in Fink’s text that although it serves as a hiding-place it reveals ‘among other things what was removed from the hagiographic narration about the “Righteous” by succeeding versions of the politics of memory and that it is an ‘image of “a place for Jews” in the Polish world – as well as the Polish world which lives in the belief of its own magnanimity’ (Zawadzka, 2011).

The shelter testifies to socio-cultural obviousness. 'But they didn't hear me. They were hurrying towards the exit, and their quick nervous steps gave the impression of flight' (Fink, 1995, p. 134). Complete lack of humour. No distance. A total disaster. And the archetypal 'Jewish ingratitude.'

The cranny on Żelazna Street is not suitable for a 'Jewish writer without a sense of humour' as such a writer may then start talking. He might say for example that he is a Polish writer and a Mazovian Jew, and that a Pole killed his father and other Poles – the whole village – handed over to be killed his one-and-a-half-year-old little brother. Or how nobody survived out of a dozen or more of his family members and acquaintances who were hiding together in a hole in the forest by Radoszyna near Mińsk Mazowiecki. We would never hear him utter the formula: 'Anti-Semitism never touched me personally.' Even though, in fact, anti-Semitism did not touch him personally. Isn't he still alive?! And this is frequently repeated without protest by people in similar situations. If the writer happened at some stage to be an actor in the The Ester Rachel Kamińska State Jewish Theatre in Warsaw, he could deliver this line as an actor. But no. He will not do so. What on earth were they doing in this theatre – with all that state money by the way – given that they are incapable of achieving even the simplest of things? 'A Jewish writer without a sense of humour' may at best say that the production at Żelazna Street 'is a complete misunderstanding because its assumptions, complications and conclusions are non-authentic and – consciously or unconsciously – are trying hard to defend a lost cause. So skilfully in fact that Jews born later [i.e. after 45] will clap at the end.' After that he is apt to add: 'I am too old for this and too much of a Pole who sees this kind of Polish production through and through' (Grynberg, 2012a). In this way, we will not astound Europe and not promote Warsaw as the European capital of culture.

One should however offer him something in the neighbourhood. Baptismal costumes are out of the question. The pawnshops? One is just as much out of the question as the other. The vicinity of the symbolic reconstruction of the footbridge over Chłodna Street with the klezmer music will only upset him. He'll start grumbling right away about the klezmerization.²¹ Maybe he should be offered one of the apartments in the house at 20 Chłodna Street? For example the elegant apartment at the front of the building in which during the occupation the chairman of the Jewish council (*Judenrat*) resided or the one in which the commandant of the Jewish Order Service (*Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst*) lived? No. He will certainly not appreciate that. The same goes for the crucifix in front of the entrance as well as the whole square named after priest Jerzy Popiełuszko with the patriotic obelisk. The figure of Our Lady of Grace? Not necessarily. The Roman-Catholic church dedicated to Saint Charles Borromeo? 'Not particularly.' The figure of the saint of the Catholic Church, the slaughterer and Jew-eater John of Capistrano? In any case it's better not even to try. The Square of the Siberian Deportees

21 'Klezmerization' is Henryk Grynberg's term. Cf. Statement by Henryk Grynberg made during the discussion about the book *Festung Warschau* at the Mojżesz Schorr Center (*Centrum im. Mojżesza Schorra*) during the XV Jewish Book Days (*Dni Książki Żydowskiej*), 13 May 2012 (recording available in the editor's archive of the bimonthly *Midrasz*).

(*Skwer Sybiraków*)? Rather next time. And, how about something on the neighbouring Ogrodowa Street? The house with the commemorative plaque for Józef Lewartowski. Here you go. Such Lewartowski. 'True' name Finkelsztajn. 'True' first name Aron. He has his street. He has his house.²² And nobody reproaches him with the fact that during the Polish-Bolshevik war [1919-1921] he became a member of the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee or that he belonged to KPP, PPR, and WKP(b) – i.e., the Communist Party of Poland (*Komunistyczna Partia Polski*), the Polish Worker's Party (*Polska Partia Robotnicza*) and the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) [*Wszechzwiązkowa Komunistyczna Partia (bolszewików)*]. If you tell the 'Jewish writer without a sense of humour' this, he will go mad. Dead certain. What kind of man is this! Exactly. If this is a man. Or send him to Siam?²³ Instead of Etgar Keret. Siam is a beautiful country. Again, we are handing him our heart only to see his clenched fist in return.

Replacing 'a Jewish writer with a sense of humour' with 'a Jewish writer without a sense of humour' reveals the configuration of power and the stakes involved in the 'enterprise on a global scale.' The machine that (re)produces the majority narrative is jammed and then disintegrates into pieces. The narcissistic self-staging and self-contemplation of the dominant group is no longer possible. However, one will not permit this to happen that somebody's lack of sense of humour ruined the socio-cultural obviousness by demonstrating that it is no obviousness but a historical construction full of violence. What else then do we have here? Here it is, ladies and gentlemen, in the backyard between Ogrodowa Street and Solidarności Street! A space rocket. Re-created out of a fountain or the other way around. It somewhat resembles Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Pojazd dla bezdomnych* (*Vehicle for the Homeless*), only that it's arranged vertically, so in a version which is unambiguously optimistic and promethean. The immediate vicinity of the Courts – formerly Courts at Leszno Street – perhaps ruins the effect somewhat because it recalls the history of the building during the occupation. The edifice, placed at the border of the ghetto and the 'Aryan side,' had an entrance from both sides and was not especially guarded. The 'Aryan side' of this building was the area where the Polish hunt for the Jews took place, as those who tried to escape through there were sought out. These were escape attempts that proved successful. We are unable to specify the exact percentage of successful escape attempts in relation to the number of escape attempts as a whole. But back to the point. The rocket is evidently waiting, ready to cover the Earth-Mars-route. The panoramic mural in the background leaves no doubt whatsoever about this. As we read in the internet explanation, it is a 'mural presenting a white-and-red (as the Polish flag) Martian landscape against a black star-studded sky' (Bachman, 2010). The Red Planet that has been painted on it looks so close, one feels as if one could just reach out and touch it.

22 Reference to a pre-war anti-Semitic slogan. According to the anti-Semitic narrative, the emblematic Jews were supposed to continue repeating to Poles: 'Your streets, our houses' (*Wasze ulice, nasze kamienice*). The formula was supposed to reflect the supposed disinheritance of Poles by Jews. The whole fragment is a pastiche of the anti-Semitic discourse with its poetics of denunciation (the obsession with 'true' names) and the myth of Judeo-communism (*żydokomuna*).

23 In 1968, during the period of anti-Semitic cleansings from above and below the slogan 'Zionists to Siam' (*Syjonisci do Syjamu*) was very popular. This formulation was the result of a confusion of 'Zion' with 'Siam.'

With the 'Jewish writer with a sense of humour' in mind, the architect of the narrowest house in the world said:

'I liked the idea that such an alien lands in this Wola district and is scanned into something as thin as a sheet of paper' (Kowalska, 2012, p. 28).

'A Jewish writer without a sense of humour' will not lend himself or herself to be scanned into anything – neither here nor anywhere else. After all however, it is not such a great leap from an alien to an astronaut. We will therefore proceed as in a famous funny joke. A Hymie goes to a bookshop and checks out a globe where to best escape from... let's say Poland. He looks and looks. Finally, he asks the shop assistant if they have another globe. At this point one has to laugh because this is a very funny funny joke.²⁴ It is much funnier than for example the sketches from Monty Python's Flying Circus, in which Mister Hilter and Mister McGoebbels converse with each other. Well, we will offer him a different globe then. An application will be submitted to the city or to the state for financing a single ticket for a one-way trip within the framework of the 'Polish-Jewish rapprochement'. Didn't he say himself that he was a Pole and a Jew? So, may they now approach each other by means of Polish-Jewish monologue.²⁵ A place such as Mars would be a great thing for somebody like a 'Jewish writer without a sense of humour.' Admittedly, the rocket is as narrow as the Keret House but for all that there's zero claustrophobia at the destination. A landscape so beautiful that it hurts the eyes to look at it, not a living soul around, no air to breathe. Just like at home. Only that it's quiet. At least for the moment.

We have then the set 'the Jews' or 'the Jew' and within this the subset 'Jewish writer without a sense of humour.' All that remains to be done is to choose an exemplification of the category of interest to us – an element within a subset within a set. Everything else is already set up. A picture of a 'Jewish writer without a sense of humour' against a Martian landscape can already be seen on the mural. A first name as much Old Testament as universal was designed for him, after the first man on Earth. Passers-by are informed that this is: 'Adam X – first Pole on Mars.'²⁶ Our man in space, to put it in a nutshell. Us coming out on top. This will be *the* event on a truly global scale – in fact, on

24 The material collected in the issue of the Jewish quarterly of literature and art *Cwiszn (Jewish humour and the like)* cited above precisely reconstructs the difference between Jewish humour and *szmonces*. In addition to that, Jicchok Niborski mentions 'a very self-ironical humour, so much so that in translations into other languages has acquired an anti-Semitic character' (Krynica & Niborski, 2013, p. 28). For translation means placing a statement within a different socio-cultural a context which in this case is characterized by specific violence proper to the relations of domination and submission. This context seizes the original meaning of the message, as happens for example in the Polish translation of the globe story.

25 *Monolog polsko-żydowski (Polish-Jewish Monologue)* is the title of one of Henryk Grynberg's books.

26 The mural was created by Adam Jastrzębski, who uses the artistic pseudonym Adam X. It was painted in 2005 in a backyard at the corner of Jana Pawła II and Solidarności Streets (entrance from 4 Ogródowa Street or 25 Jana Pawła II Street). As the artist said in an interview for Puszka Foundation, 'the work was directly inspired by this concrete place, a tin rocket found in the backyard.' 'I decided to reconnect this rocket with its aesthetic context, which disappeared over the years. The rocket as a decorative element of the backyard is linked to the Polish People's Republic propaganda of the conquest of space, which was of course only a modest offshoot of the Soviets' policy of cosmic success. [...] I created a backyard scenography by reconstructing next to the rocket a fragment of those visions, notions and aspirations, rather naïve and childlike in kind, because only in their childlike backyard fantasies could Poles finally play their part in the conquest of space.' At the same time, the project refers to the context of the year 2005: the electoral victory of the party Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*), the expansion of the ideas of the Fourth Republic of Poland and the climate of 'awakening nationalist emotions, right-wing aspirations of building a new Poland and new Poles' (Bachman, 2010).

more than one globe! We will outdo intercontinental advertising with an unprecedented interplanetary promotion.

One of the sponsors of the narrowest house in the world, the director of the Polish Modern Art Foundation (*Fundacja Polskiej Sztuki Nowoczesnej*), offered praise for the project in the first person plural:

‘Finally, we are speaking the language of the young. And [...] Poland will not be perceived solely as that country on whose territory the Holocaust was committed’ (statement by Piotr Nowicki, cited in: Bartoszewicz, 2012e, p. 4).

For not only in the undertaking described above but in the whole Polish dominant narrative about the Holocaust it is the image of Poland and the Poles that is fundamentally at stake. ‘Poland is what’s most important.’²⁷



**Polska
jest najważniejsza**

Wykonanie: P&K Warszawa, realizacja: Pracownia Grafiki Polska, Jarosław Kaczyński, ul. Wierzyńska 14/15, 01-118 Warszawa

‘Poland is what’s most important.’ A 2010 election poster of the party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice). Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka

²⁷ Election campaign slogan of the party Law and Justice from the year 2010.



Fountain in the form of a space rocket (author unknown, 1970s), in the background the eastern elevation of the Courts [formerly Courts at Leszno Street] (architect: Bohdan Pniewski, 1935-1939) – backyard of premises at 4 Ogrodowa, 35 Jana Pawła II and 119/125 Solidarności Streets, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka



Adam Jastrzębski's mural *Adam X – first Pole on Mars* (2005), detail – backyard of premises at 4 Ogrodowa, 35 Jana Pawła II and 119/125 Solidarności Streets, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka



Adam Jastrzębski's mural *Adam X - first Pole on Mars* (2005), close-up, in the background the eastern elevation of the Courts [formerly Courts at Leszno Street] (architect: Bohdan Pniewski, 1935-1939) – backyard of premises at 4 Ogródowa, 35 Jana Pawła II and 119/125 Solidarności Streets, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka



Adam Jastrzębski's mural *Adam X - first Pole on Mars* (2005), general view, in the background the eastern elevation of the Courts [formerly Courts at Leszno Street] (architect: Bohdan Pniewski, 1935-1939) – backyard of premises at 4 Ogródowa, 35 Jana Pawła II and 119/125 Solidarności Streets, Warsaw, January 2013. Photograph: Elżbieta Janicka

Concluding remarks

'The narrowest house in the world' – the Keret House – is an example of an image campaign paradoxical and counterproductive in kind. It exposes everything it was intended to camouflage. It confirms everything it was supposed to negate. Against the creators' very intentions it proves that the problem with the collective self-image has as its source not an unfair stereotype but actual facts. The analysis of the way the object has been received demonstrates an essential concurrence of feelings on the part of the spectators, who in other respects are separated by a barrier of a self-declared world view and material status. However, these spectators are participants within the same culture. In other words: the patterns characteristic of the dominant majority culture in Poland – collectivistic-hierarchical in kind – are also reproduced by the group declaring itself as open, egalitarian, non-collectivistic, and as being against any form of violence and exclusion – with anti-Semitism at the forefront. This also allows us to comprehend the category 'we' as denoting the participants' culture. Its patterns are passed on from generation to generation (temporal continuum) and are realized from the bottom to the top of the societal spectrum (class continuum). Only by means of such a reading can we make sense of linguistic idioms, absurd from a logical point of view, such as 'In 1410, we won the First Battle of Tannenberg' or the one mentioned in the introduction – 'What will they say about us abroad?'

The power of cultural patterns is based to a great extent on the fact that they remain unidentified, transparent, constituting a socio-cultural obviousness. Only through problematizing and reflecting upon them can we deprive them of the status of obviousness, thereby enabling us to engage in a confrontation with them. This concern for self-image is bound up with a repertoire, indeed an arsenal, of terms such as reputation, pride, honour, dignity. This much is obvious. Less so is the observation that the aforementioned categories are attributes of the so-called cultural nobility.²⁸ The least obvious, however, is the claim that they only have a meaning as such when they are used as a privilege, which the dominant group denies others in a gesture of exclusion. By virtue of their very construction they then constitute an instrument of symbolic violence, they are cogs in the wheel of the machine for producing exclusion. In the view of the exclusionist majority, Jews did not live and did not die with dignity. Insights into the Polish language do not leave any doubts about that whatsoever. The cliché of the insurgents of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising fighting for an 'honourable death' or the cliché of Jews deported to their death 'like lambs to the slaughter' do not apply to non-Jews. The attachment of the label 'cattle' to the victims of the Katyń massacre or the Warsaw citizens expelled from the city by the German occupiers after the defeat of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 is impossible to imagine – let alone establish – within Polish majority culture. Just as unimaginable as the idea that the death of the Polish civilian population

28 Cf. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, 'Incognito ergo sum'. *O wytwarzaniu obojętności*, paper given on 22 April 2013 at the international academic conference *Być świadkiem Zagłady* ("Being a witness to the Holocaust"), and published in this issue (Tokarska-Bakir, 2013). On the category of cultural nobility cf. the first chapter ('A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste') in Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 11–96).

during the above mentioned uprising and under other circumstances might be considered as 'dishonourable.'

It is my conviction that dignity – as a category of cultural nobility – preserved its characteristic features of exclusion until the very end. The 'fight for an honourable death' undertaken by Jews was not effective in bringing about their actual equality, even if the whole process ended with a death considered as totally correct from the point of view of the exclusionist culture. On the grave of Berek Joselewicz the following inscription was placed: 'Not by liquor nor by tricker, but by his blood did he earn fame.'²⁹ The colonel's epitaph is a triple compulsive negation of Jewishness, which in effect exposes Jewishness in the foreground – treated as a compromising phenomenon and an obscene J-word. In 1830, Joselewicz's soldiers, tested in battle, were not received into the ranks of the November insurgents. In 1943, Maria Kann – an activist of Żegota, a Righteous among the Nations – looking at the Warsaw ghetto in flames writes: 'The cases when Jews spilled blood for the country that received them, were exceptions. Bereks Joselewicz were few and far between.' During the Holocaust the paradigm is completed and achieves a homeostasis.

Within the Polish narrative the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising fighters, just as Berek Joselewicz, have the status of an oxymoron. They constitute an exception confirming the rule. For the Jews who were (still) alive their 'fight for an honourable death' remained without inclusivist consequences. Thus, the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) did not react to the request for maps of the sewerage system and hiding-places on the 'Aryan side' on the part of Mordechai Anielewicz and the supreme command of the Jewish Fighting Organization (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, ŻOB). The AK also displayed no interest in establishing a Jewish unit within its ranks in the period between the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943) and the later Warsaw Uprising (1944), which Iczhak Cukierman, the last commander of the ŻOB, persistently strove for. The ŻOB fighters who went to the partisans were regularly murdered by the Polish underground fighting for independence. In the end, during the Warsaw Uprising (1944) the male and female soldiers of the ŻOB joined ranks with the communists in the People's Army (*Armia Ludowa*, AL) given the fact that within the AK they were threatened with death on the part of their Polish comrades in arms.

Despite occasional exceptions for some individuals, the above mentioned mechanism of exclusion manifested itself with regard to Jews who were not members of the ŻOB as well as with regard to other resistance formations. On the one hand we have Jews who gave testimony of the so-called combative bravery in a way as not to raise doubts among the Polish jurors; on the other we have Poles representing Polishness in the most legitimate sense (something that cannot be said about the communist underground given the fundamentals of the Polish dominant culture). The honour-dignity paradigm is not subordinated to the principle of 'where there is a will, there is a way.'

29 The inscription originates from the year 1909 – cf. the photography in: Janion 2009, p. 73. The praising of Joselewicz refers to the anti-Semitic image of Jews driving Christians into alcoholism, cheating on them through money-lending as well as avoiding military service because of disloyalty and cowardice.

For the overriding principle to this paradigm is anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism organises the field as defined by Bourdieu, in which the analyzed categories (dignity *etc.*) function; and it is to this principle that the latter are subordinated. On the gate to the kingdom of dignity and honour, the following formula, which Dariusz Libionka reconstructed on the basis of source analysis, is visible: 'Berek Joselewicz, goodbye and good luck' (Libionka, 2009, pp. 67–85). For those who are not as sharp-witted one could add underneath: 'A good Anielewicz, is a dead Anielewicz' – let's spray-paint it, given that we have to 'speak the language of the young,' as recommended by the decision-makers of culture.

The dynamic of the Polish fixation with its image resembles expending energy while in neutral gear. If the community sees a satisfying image of itself in the mirror of the foreign beholder, it regards this as a success as well as an indicator that there are no reasons for concern. However, if it transpires that reality deviates from the idealized image, too bad for reality. No harm brought about and no suffering inflicted by the community are capable of disturbing its smug complacency – as long as they do not tarnish its good reputation, that is as long as such harm and such suffering remain undisclosed by the authority of judgement.

This raises the question about the conditions of possibility for breaking the vicious circle of reproducing the oppressive patterns of Polish culture. It is a question of the possibility of bringing about a paradigmatic, emancipatory change. One of the factors standing in the way is doubtless the concern for the individual and collective self-image. This concern upholds the status of cultural-societal obviousness as one of the main values. The *status quo* will remain unthreatened as long as keeping up appearances will be more important for the individual and community than making a stand against the mechanisms of exclusion and violence, and also – in the context of the above analyzed anti-Semitic heritage of Polish majority culture – against murder.

Chopin Airport – Ben Gurion Airport / Ben Gurion Airport – Chopin Airport,
November 2012 – February 2013

Translation from the Polish: Katrin Stoll (with special thanks to Michael Fitzpatrick for his help)

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