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Jew, Pole, Artist: Constructing Identity after the Holocaust.

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Jew, Pole, Artist: Constructing Identity after the Holocaust[1]

"He is equally a Jew, a Pole and an artist" – so the essayist Kazimierz Brandys repeats his own earlier words about the novelist Adolf Rudnicki in *Remembered* (*Zapamiętane*), a volume of autobiographical prose published in the mid-1990s.[2] He did not take this view about Rudnicki alone. Indeed, he applied the same triple definition to various other figures, including the well-known poet Aleksander Wat. Even more significantly, Brandys clearly viewed himself in the same manner, not only in *Remembered*, but also in the earlier *Months* (*Miesiące*): as a writer of dual national identity.

Reflections on national belonging and the role of the writer form important motifs in the personal writings of several contemporary authors associated with Poland's Jewish world. We find the same knot of problems not only in the autobiographical prose of Kazimierz Brandys (*Miesiące 1978-1979, Miesiące1980-1981, Miesiące 1982-1984, Miesiące 1984-1987, Zapamiętane, Przygody Robinsona, Notatki z lektur i życia*); but also in the diaries of his elder brother, Marian *(Dzienniki 1972, Dzienniki 1975-1977, Dzienniki 1978)*; in certain well-known passages from the diaries of Adolf Rudnicki (*Dziennik 1984*); in the notebooks of Aleksander Wat (*Dziennik bez samogłosek*); the memoirs of Henryk Vogler *(Wyznanie mojżeszowe)* and Aleksander Rozenfeld *(Podanie o prawo powrotu)*; and finally, in the autobiography of Artur Sandauer (*Byłem*).

The complex identity of authors on the Polish-Jewish borderline arises in these works on multiple and diverse occasions: in anecdotes, essayistic excursions, self-analyses and portraits of literary *confrères*. The writers variously reduce and increase the objective

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1 This text constitutes an altered and expanded version of a paper given at a conference on "Jews in Literature" at the University of Silesia (Katowice, 21-23 April 1999).

2 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1995), 18.

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distance of their observations, evaluating their own positions and analyzing the positions of others, studying the situation from within and without, probing their own and other people's consciousness, recording their own and other people's behavior, as if they were testing diverse perspectives on the phenomenon and diverse ways of speaking about it. It is striking how often an external impulse – the prying of an inquisitive journalist[3] or the need to fill out a passport form[4] – provokes the writers to ask themselves questions about community and solidarity, distinction and difference. It is striking how all of them seem to need a field of reference delineated by the destinies and choices of others, and how they find a background of collective models so essential. Reflections on their own identity often arise simply as glosses to stories about acquaintances, friends, and enemies – as if each individual case could become more tangible and comprehensible thanks to other comparable cases, as if it were only the certainty that identity trouble forms a universal experience that could provide sufficient justification for devoting any attention to it at all.

On reading these diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies, we sometimes get the irresistible impression that Artur Sandauer's concept of autobiographical modulation as a literary device has found collective expression within them. According to Sandauer, the same event "could be served, respectively, in frivolous, tragic, realistic or grotesque flavors."[5] The distinctions in aesthetic and stylistic registers observed by Sandauer are clearly audible in this hastily assembled choir of voices:

> I never felt like a Polish Jew or a Jewish Pole. I couldn't stand mestizos. I always felt like a Jewish Jew and a Polish Pole. This is both difficult to explain and true at the same time. I was always proud – as far as one may be proud simply for belonging to one human group or another – that I was a Pole, that I was a Jew. And yet I was also devastated that I was a Pole, that I was a Jew.[6]

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3 This situation frequently occurs. In *Miesiące*, Kazimierz Brandys writes: "A woman from Radio France-Culture asked me whether I felt more like a Pole or a Jew – to which I answered that my feelings about myself are variable. We would have to begin with the fact that I feel like a vertebrate from a supposedly higher species of mammals. Sometimes I feel like a European. I think in Polish, I'm a Polish writer, I belong to the milieu of the Polish intelligentsia, and I was raised within Polish culture. When they persecute the Jews, I feel like a Jew" (*Miesiące 1985–1987* [Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1989], 158).

4 Marian Brandys makes a note in his *Dzienniki 1972* of the following story from Julian Stryjkowski: "When he wrote 'Polish' under nationality on a passport application for a trip to Italy (he was going there as a delegate of the Polish Writers' Union), his hand began to tremble. It had never trembled before. At once, he realized that he should have written 'Jewish nationality,' for at that moment he felt like a Jew" (*Dzienniki 1972* [Warszawa: Iskry, 1996], 98). The passport scene also appears in Kazimierz Brandys's *Miesiące 1985–1987* (53).

5 Sandauer, Artur, "Zapiski z martwego miasta (Autobiografie i parabiografie)," *Proza* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1983), 114.

6 Wat, Aleksander, *Dziennik bez samogłosek* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1990), 19.

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> To be a Jew is a curse; to be a Pole is a curse; to be both at the same time in one body is truly difficult to bear.[7]
>
> I am both a Pole and a Jew. Unfortunately, in an era of newly and ever more powerfully rising nationalisms, this seems impossible to some people.[8]
>
> Nobody will be fully satisfied with this little work of mine. The Jews will be upset at me and take me for an apostate for not throwing my lot in with Jewry and the very idea of Jewry with all my heart and soul. But I have surrendered at least half of these two organs (as far as it is appropriate to speak of the soul so objectively) to Poland. The Poles will condemn me for polluting their pure and irreproachable Polishness with ingredients of an entirely different, unfamiliar order...I have only one chance and one lonely hope...If there exists somewhere on high – above our reality – some kind of almighty power...then my confession might be received with indulgent understanding. And I trust that all my errors and sins – those I have confessed, those I have concealed and those I have forgotten – will be magnanimously forgiven together with both my Polishness and my Jewishness. Amen.[9]
>
> A close acquaintance of mine – who shall remain nameless, as he is a well-known figure – says the following: "To be Polish is already a misfortune. To be a Pole and a Jew is a misfortune within a misfortune. To be a Pole, a Jew, and a writer means three misfortunes.[10]

As these quotations suggest, one may speak about complex problems of identity in tones of elevated seriousness, colloquial directness, melancholy spiced with humor, or with the intention of producing a rhetorical effect. Stories of identity employ several permanent figures. Among them, we find above all the genealogy and the family history. Almost all the above-cited authors of various diaries, journals and memoirs spin brief or more expansive family tales. We even encounter two versions of the same family story told by the Brandys brothers. Kazimierz Brandys repeatedly relates the history of the family line from its Czech beginnings lost in the gloom of a legendary past through to its most recent phase in Warsaw and Paris, while Marian Brandys examines two different versions of the family's origins – Semitic and Scandinavian. Sandauer describes the city of Sambor, whose mythical topography forms the background for understanding the choices, wanderings, and ideological conflicts that divide the members of his family. Józef Hen returns to his former self as a little boy from Nowolipie Street and "the Jewish universe in Warsaw" between the wars.[11] Vogler presents a Krakow Jewish version of the fading glory of a merchant's home. The key role in these stories falls not only to the places to which the writers belong – Warsaw, Krakow, Sambor – but more broadly to the places and spaces that represent a sense of rootedness. These are clearly geographical, though ultimately they are also historical and social.

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7 Rozenfeld, Aleksander, *Podanie o prawo powrotu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1990), 48.

8 Vogler, Henryk, *Wyznanie mojżeszowe* (Warszawa: PIW, 1994), 98.

9 Ibid., 123-124.

10 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982-1984* (Paris: Instytut Literacki,1984), 120-121.

11 Anna Sobolewska gave this title to Hen's work *Nowolipie Street*. See: Sobolewska, Anna, "Żydowski kosmos w Warszawie. Nowolipie" Józefa Hena jako dokument pamięci," *Literackie portrety Żydów*, ed. E. Łoch (Lublin: UMCS,1996).

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It is worth remembering that Polish-Jewish literature of the interwar period also referred widely to genealogy and family history. Indeed, the search for identity was one of its most important themes. This choice has a deep motivation. In the end, family stories are tales about bonds, and – in certain aspects – about stability and continuity. They are also tales about community, within which and thanks to which a person can construct his or her own identity. Yet in order to have any power beyond the particular or to merit retelling outside the most intimate circles, the family biography must reveal a more general pattern and thus transform itself into a kind of exemplary tale.[12]

The rules for constructing this type of model are easy to grasp – for instance, in one of Marian Brandys's genealogies. He refers to "all...my ancestors and kinsfolk over three hundred years in Poland who actively participated in Polish life: the wise doctor from the Czech Brandeis family (now Brandys) who performed the duties of physician at the court of King Władysław IV Vasa and gave the beginning for more than one native Polish family of the nobility; the captain and doctor in Tadeusz Kościuszko's insurrectionary army; the member of the National Government during the January Uprising; and...three uncles in the Polish legions."[13] Finally, he adds his own participation in the campaign to repel the Nazi invasion in September 1939. In the history of his family, he is exclusively interested in the process of transition from Jewishness to Polishness. Therefore, he presents the narrative according to the classic assimilation model. Moreover, through his eyes, the Polish side takes on an exemplary insurrectionary and patriotic form. Yet this same historical material – as Kazimierz Brandys suggests – may also reveal a very different pattern. Specifically, this entails a more significant role for the Jewish aspects, as the Holocaust casts a shadow on the assimilation process, pushing the family back towards the Jewish side.

Interestingly, a situation of double or parallel reading may also serve as a figure of identity. This is the case in Rudnicki's diaries, where he reads both Andrzej Strug and Jeszajahu Trunk,[14] as well as in Kazimierz Brandys's *Robinson's Adventures* (*Przygody Robinsona*), where the author reads Philip Roth and various works about Andrzej Towiański. This combination of Polish and Jewish texts may be supplemented with commentaries showing the similarities and differences between works and authors – or even raising the question of relations between Poles and Jews. And yet they may also do without this kind of commentary, since the crucial point here is precisely the situation of the reader, who defines his or her place in cultural space through reading, thus naming the regions of his or her spiritual home.

Accounts of identity troubles and dilemmas have appeared in personal documentary literature for quite obvious reasons. The distinguishing characteristic of this genre – as Roman Zimand has established – is the creation of "a world of writing directly

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12 See: Złatanowa, Nadia, "Naród rodzin w świetle przekazów rodowodowych," *Kategoria naroduw kulturach słowiańskich,* eds. T. Dąbek-Wirgowa and A. Makowiecki (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1993), 40.

13 Brandys, Marian, *Dziennik 1978* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1997), 34.

14 Rudnicki, Adolf, "Dziennik 1984," *Twórczość* 9 (1995).

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about oneself."[15] We might add that this is also a world in which one may express the "I" in all its multifaceted and mutable nature – a world in which one may construct the "I." A personal record is equally a space for diagnosing individual identity, a field of battle over this identity, and the place of its creation. This is the case in diaries, which record the flickering stream of external events in all their fluidity and momentary existence, and in autobiographies or memoirs, which aim to unify, organize and structure experiences. After all, it is not only diarists who come to believe that they are using a form that is "always inclined...towards self-creation."[16] Memoirists also understand that when they set about "describing their lives," they simultaneously set about "creating them."[17] Organizing memories is an operation of constructing and establishing meaning.

Some of the works under discussion here refer directly to a Gombrowiczean conception of literature as the terrain of a game played over the self. Sandauer and Kazimierz Brandys perhaps most strongly emphasize the self-creative (and self-analytical) role of writing. Both of them are equally intrigued by the mystery of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* in their own work – the problem of the relation between invention and experience. In *Notes from a Dead City* (*Zapiski z martwego miasta*), Sandauer combines autobiographical passages with the grotesque parabiography of Mieczysław Rosenzweig, thus staging the transmutation of his own fate into a plot with a fictional character before the reader's very eyes. In *Months, Remembered* and *Robinson's Adventures*, Kazimierz Brandys introduces fictional elements into his documentary notes, only to unmask these "spasmodic movements of the literary writer" (143) and to examine through metacommentary the function of literary constructions in autobiographical narrative.

As a literary genre in which an inclination towards truth plays a fundamental role, personal testimony demands a special sphere of authenticity and honesty. However problematic or conventional this principle might appear, it often passes as a basic condition of the genre. Brandys insists that "if the writer censors his own identity, he thus condemns himself to untruth, which will either shut his mouth or metamorphose into hatred."[18] In this observation, he equates multiple phenomena – creative work and truth, creative work and honesty, creative work and identity.

At the same time, understanding writing as both an artistic and existential task is not only a lesson learnt from the school of Gombrowicz for these authors. They also refer to other models. All the family stories they tell are marked by the Holocaust. All give accounts of death and salvation. Kazimierz Brandys describes his "adventures" in Warsaw on the so-called "Aryan side." Sandauer describes the ghetto in Sambor and his time in hiding. Vogler relates his experience of the camps. The narrator of *Months* abandons the biographies of his kinsfolk in mid-sentence, concluding them with the

15 Zimand, Roman, *Diarysta Stefan Ż* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1990), 17.

16 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 201.

17 Vogler, Henryk, *Autoportret z pamięci*, Volume 1: *Część pierwsza: dzieciństwo i młodość* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978), 5.

18 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 100.

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following information: "I do not know when or in what particular circumstances they suffered and died."[19] Even more clearly, he writes: "I had no wish to get to the bottom of how and when they died."[20] According to Marta Młodkowska – an expert in documentary evidence from the Warsaw Ghetto – we find in these Holocaust testimonies a "sylleptic understanding" (Ryszard Nycz's phrase[21]) of subjectivity, in the sense that writing represents for these authors a form of existence, while "textual subjectivity saves both the individual and the whole world he describes by exempting them from the law of a universal Holocaust."[22]

Here we should recall that the triple definition "Jew-Pole-artist" arose in Polish literature as a response to the Holocaust. Indeed, the Jewish-Polish poet Julian Tuwim proclaimed this formulation in one of his most famous and dramatic texts – a confession-manifesto written in 1944 under the title "We Polish Jews" and dedicated to "My mother in Poland or her most beloved shade." Here the proud and tragic refrain "I am a Pole because it pleases me" appears alongside a request that the "Polish poet" might earn the rank of "Jew Doloris Causa" from "the nation that produced him":

> Not for any merits of mine, for I have none to show you. I shall consider it a promotion and the highest honor for the few Polish verses that might outlive me and whose memory will be bound to my name – the name of a Polish Jew.[23]

Tuwim's manifesto reveals identity as founded on an individual decision or internal choice, though these might not always be entirely independent. For the younger generation of writers reaching maturity in independent Poland between the wars, it became clear that Jewish identity was quite a different question, as we observe in Józef Hen's *Nowolipie Street*:

> Jewishness does not demand orthodoxy, a ritual diet, specific clothes and customs, or even language. Instead, it is exclusively an internal matter of feeling one's own identity – or an external matter for others who think they see Jewish people.[24]

Therefore, both Tuwim and Hen (who – *nota bene* – devoted a beautiful section of his autobiographical *I'm Not Afraid of Sleepless Nights* [*Nie boję się bezsennych nocy*] to Tuwim's "We Polish Jews") experienced a phenomenon described in Lucy Dawidowicz's well-known article "Jewish Identity: A Matter of Fate, A Matter of Choice." According to Dawidowicz, post-Enlightenment Jewish culture – which was open to external influences – gave rise to a modern model of identity in which "being a Jew was not only

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19 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985-1987* (Paris, Instytut Literacki, 1987), 78.

20 Ibid., 79.

21 Nycz, Ryszard, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997), 107-114.

22 Młodkowska, Marta, "Pisanie jako forma istnienia - na podstaiuie dokumentów z getta warszawskiego," *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1 (1999), 73.

23 Tuwim, Julian, *My, Żydzi Polscy... We, Polish Jews...* (Warszawa: Shalom, 1993), 16.

24 Hen, Józef, *Nowolipie* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1991), 104.

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a question of origin and a sentence of fate. It was a question of the choice or desire to be a Jew."[25] In short, being Jewish was a question of a conscious will to affirm everything Jewish.

Nevertheless, such identity choices always had to confront – as Hen emphasizes – the reactions of the broader community. In *Nowolipie Street*, we find the archetypal scene – so to speak – in which a child is spurned by his classmates as an outside, a "lousy Jew." Hen writes: "At once I had to reconcile myself with this reality. That it would be a distinguishing mark throughout my life, a curse from childhood."[26] An identical scene recurs several times in Brandys's *Robinson's Adventures*. Here the narrator is first rejected by the Poles and then finally "hears who he is" from the Germans. Jewishness is associated with the traumatic experiences of stigmatization, a stamp that cannot be erased from the memory since it constantly returns in various new forms of the exclusion ritual. Even the older Brandys, who considers his choice of Polishness as one of his most important existential decisions, mentions in his notes of 1978 that he has started work on a book entitled *The Stain of Otherness*.

In the interwar period, the two communities existed alongside each other, differing in culture and religion, often mutually antagonistic. National identity appeared to many as a choice, as Henryk Vogler observes:

> At that time, things presented themselves quite separately. One was either a Pole or a Jew. There did not seem to be any other possibilities. Polish culture seemed separate and independent to people immersed in it, thus giving rise to hostilities towards other equally separate cultures, which threatened the one and only proper culture.[27]

Even Tuwim – we should add – appeared in Polish nationalist circles of the time as a Jewish writer creating Jewish poetry, while his public image consisted of various anti-Jewish stereotypes (of which he was perfectly well aware, as his numerous satires on anti-Semitism suggest). Moreover, thinking in categories of radical difference and division also prevailed on the Jewish side. A young Roman Brandstaetter described writers associated with the liberal *Literary News* magazine (*Wiadomości Literackie*) as "half-Jews, half-Poles" and "national hermaphrodites," basing his pun on a concept of anomaly and illness.[28]

Tuwim's manifesto – and we should not forget that before the war he was the author of several poems interpreted as hostile towards Jews – represents an early example of transformations in the views of writers with Jewish background in the face of the Holocaust. In *Robinson's Adventures* – written almost half a century later – Kazimierz

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25 Dawidowicz, Lucy, "Jewish Identity: A Matter of Fate, A Matter of Choice," *The Jewish Presence: Essays on Identity and History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 4.

26 Hen, *Nowolipie*, 55.

27 Vogler, *Wyznanie*, 98. At the same time, in her interpretation of Hen's *Nowolipie Street*, Anna Sobolewska writes about the formation of a "Polish-Jewish identity" (See: Sobolewska, "Żydowski kosmos w Warszawie," 52).

28 Brandstaetter, Roman, *Zmowa eunuchów* (Warszawa, 1936), 105.

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Brandys makes the following description of their situation: "Keeping quiet about one's Jewish origins after the extermination of the European Jews is quite a different matter from concealing it before this event. By hiding one's origins as an odious secret after the Holocaust, one indirectly admits that the cannibals were right."[29] Being a Jew is understood here as an act of conscious will to affirm the universal values of humanity. One is not a Jew in spite of the Holocaust, but rather against the Holocaust.

Even today the idea of identity as an act of choice is not self-evident to everybody. Therefore, it was not for no reason that Brandys included the following sentence in his words of prayer offered up to God: "Lord, my homeland is the people who acknowledge my nationality, which I myself have determined."[30]

Yet the problem of identity is not only complicated when others shape us from the outside – creating an image, imposing it upon us and dictating our allegiances. After all, it is possible for a person to define himself independently of his social image, or even to define himself against it, constructing his "I" in an act of sovereign freedom, protest or revolt. This attitude distinguishes the *Diaries* of Marian Brandys, who repeatedly rejects any external determinations of his nationality – both when those expressing them are hostile to him and when they are among his closest peers:

> I feel like a Pole, and I shall not allow anybody to impose any other classification on me, just as forty years ago in cadet school I did not allow anybody to categorize me under Jewish nationality. I feel a sense of community with the Jews only when they are persecuted.[31]

In his indomitable Polishness – which he affirms in spite of and perhaps on account of anti-Semitism – Brandys seems to resemble Victor Klemperer, who confirmed his German identity in his diaries during the years of the most extreme anti-Jewish persecutions.

The most telling aspect of the trouble with identity undoubtedly lies in the fact that the double identification may manifest itself in the individual's personal experience as a process of change, vacillation and constant shifts between national poles. The poet Aleksander Wat described himself in the 1950s as a "Jewish Jew" and a "Polish Pole." Yet he would go on to make the following observation in later decades: "I am and always will be a Jewish cosmopolitan who speaks Polish – and that's that."[32] Later he would shift his position yet again:

> In my old age, I feel increasingly in my deepest being like a Jew, a distant descendant of Rashi, the twelfth-century philosopher and Bible commentator from Troyes, a descendant of generations of rabbis from the priestly caste, with my fingers forming the gesture of priestly blessing.[33]

Kazimierz Brandys sometimes performs certain quintessentially Polish rituals (which include presenting satirical interpretations of Poland, posing in front of Juliusz Słowacki's

29 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Przygody Robinsona*, 73.

30 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 53.

31 Brandys, Marian, *Dzienniki 1972* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1996), 99.

32 Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 139.

33 Ibid., 231.

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portrait, and describing a daguerreotype of Adam Mickiewicz decorating his Paris studio). Sometimes he characterizes his nationality as an allegiance to the intelligentsia – "liberated from hatred and superstitions."[34] Sometimes – especially in his recollections of the occupation – he gives moving expression to his sense of connection with the Jews. The author himself notices and comments on all these fluctuations in his national feeling, from volume to volume devoting more and more space to Jewish questions and confirming his double allegiance.[35]

Artur Sandauer – on the other hand – explains how often he has confronted the problem of self-definition ("Jew or Pole? Or maybe both?"[36]), and how often he has attempted to avoid any final decision. At the same time, he wishes to understand his entire *oeuvre* as a record of a great transition, as documentary evidence of "the gradual transformation of a Jew into a Pole."[37] At various stages of his life, he produces autobiographical writings that record the different phases of this metamorphosis.

The most passionate accounts of these identity dilemmas come from Aleksander Rozenfeld. His *Petition for the Right of Return* (*Podanie o prawo powrotu*) records a life spent on the road in constant wanderings between Israel and Poland, between two cultures and two societies. Rozenfeld exclaims: "Among Jews, I am not a Jew; among non-Jews, I am a Jew. It seems that I have hallucinated my own self."[38] Rozenfeld calls himself a Jew, a Pole, a Polish Jew, a Pole of Jewish origin, and finally a Jew and a Pole at once. Each of these separate identifications – and all of them together – are equally honest. All of them – though fragmentary, momentary and dependent on the situation – ultimately contribute to the construction of the author's identity.

More problematically, all of these vacillations and changes (sociology and psychology describe them as situational and alterable actualizations of diverse dimensions of identity) may provoke acute and painful conflicts with society. Being a Pole and a Jew may well appear as a coherent duality for the individual concerned, but it often turns out to be confusing for others who find it foreign to their own experience. They see only a split or an internal contradiction, while they demand clear and unambiguous declarations. The theme of double identification – which is so important in the late autobiographical prose of Kazimierz Brandys – leads one critic to make the following remark: "Coming from an entirely assimilated family, with no knowledge of the Jewish language, religion or culture…he presents a curious and not entirely authentic split."[39] This complex identity remains a subjective truth of internal experience.

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34 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985-1987*, 53.

35 Zbigniew Jarosiński notices this theme in his article "Świadectwa Kazimierza Brandysa," published in *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej: Kontynuacje*, eds. A. Brodzka and L. Burska (Warszawa: IBL, 1996).

36 Sandauer, Artur, *Byłem…* (Warszawa: PIW, 1991), 114.

37 Ibid., 6.

38 Rozenfeld, Aleksander, *Podanie o prawo powrotu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1990), 103.

39 Czyżak, Agnieszka, *Kazimierz Brandys* (Poznań: Rebis, 1998), 117-118.

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Characteristically, Rozenfeld's life in Israel reveals a chain of never-ending clashes with everybody – family, officials, employers and politicians – over his identity as a Pole. The only non-confrontational and constructive role he is capable of inventing for himself is that of translator – "building a bridge between the Polish and Hebrew languages."[40] Kazimierz Brandys – who lived in Poland, Germany, France, and the United States – must constantly stand up to Polish anti-Semitism, while simultaneously resisting any Jewish blanket condemnations of all Poles. He keeps changing fronts, representing first one and then the other of the conflicting sides. Regardless of who is taking aim at whom, each and every attack is equally dangerous, since each attack strikes at the connection between Polishness and Jewishness that forms the writer's personal and artistic *raison d'être*. By placing himself on the national borderline, Brandys must accept – whether he likes it or not – the role of a mediator mitigating the mutual reproaches of the two parties: "People on both sides are uttering ridiculous outrages."[41]

In a work titled *The Social Identity of the Individual* (*Społeczna tożsamość jednostki*), the sociologist Małgorzata Melchior describes double identification as "a way of solving the problem of the (cultural, ethnic, social) 'borderline' and the 'conflict' of identity."[42] At the same time, she emphasize the following point:

> This solution is possible only when the individual believes that the two identifications are not mutually contradictory or exclusive, since they refer to different aspects of the individual's existence or concern meanings and values that are in a certain sense "incommensurable."[43]

The personal documentary literature under discussion here demonstrates that this can be the case in situations of a split between personal destiny and cultural roots. We recognize this division in the fact that complete assimilation into the Polish tradition by no means excludes a share in a Jewish destiny. Sandauer expresses this conviction in the central dichotomy through which he strives to comprehend himself: "Jewish life, Polish culture."[44] In *Months*, Kazimierz Brandys records an author's meeting in Jerusalem, where he publically emphasizes his "allegiance to Polish culture and the nature...of its links with Jewry."[45] In *Remembered* – on the other hand – he records his reaction to a request that he attend a Paris synagogue, where a *minyan* was required to pray for the recently deceased Adolf Rudnicki: "I don't like religious rituals, I don't know Hebrew, and I do not belong to any faith."[46] Nevertheless, he decides to visit the synagogue on rue Copernic and experiences a powerfully emotional response. He tells himself that this is not a religious experience,

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40 Rozenfeld, *Podanie o prawo powrotu*, 35.

41 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982–1984* (Paris: Instytut Literacki), 144.

42 Melchior, Małgorzata, *Społeczna tożsamość jednostki (w świetle wywiadów z Polakami pochodzenia żydowskiego urodzonymi w latach 1944–1955)* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1990), 169.

43 Ibid.

44 Sandauer, *Byłem*, 6.

45 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 166.

46 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 8.

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but rather a feeling evoked by "the sight of one or two hundred praying people, the vast majority of whom were born after the time of the Nazi ovens. These were the children and grandchildren of those who had survived the gas chambers."[47]

This sight forces him to think about the murdered and the living, his own dead loved ones and himself as a survivor. Jewishness comes to him mainly as a sense of community in danger and suffering. His attachment to Polishness is not a betrayal. Yet rejecting solidarity and separating himself from the Jewish destiny clearly is a betrayal: "All my sins seem childish next to the fact that I was alive, playing at cards, having women, while they were dying."[48]

Ultimately, activating one's Jewishness does not inevitably mean rejecting or compromising assimilation. On the contrary, despite the passage of time, the majority of these writers still believe in the values of the "humanitarian vulgate"[49] – the liberal ideas of the assimilators dating back to the Enlightenment. This attitude is often presented as a continuation of family traditions or as the legacy of one's ancestors. Kazimierz Brandys describes his family tradition as "intelligentsia Judeo-Polishness,"[50] emphasizing its immediate influence on himself: "My father was a fervent assimilator, though he was not one of those who denied his Jewish origins."[51] Marian Brandys also repeatedly declares his loyalty to the assimilationist code, criticizing any deviation from this code as a loss of existential foundations.

We might well ask where art fits into all this. Despite all the vacillations, changes and shifting circumstances, creativity typically remains an undisputed and inviolable value. The notes of Kazimierz Brandys – which have been criticized (often harshly and uncompromisingly) for their worship of literature – reveal that he absolutized art, celebrated the role of the artist and identified writing with existence partly because these processes seemed to offer the surest path to self-definition:

> It was and still is irrelevant to me whether somebody calls me a Pole of Jewish origin or a Jew of Polish origin. Language determines my identity. I think and write in Polish. I have not written a single literary sentence in any other language. I could not define my sense of myself in any other way. Being a Polish (or French or English) writer has a certain advantage over any other claims. It is objective and verifiable, while the authenticity of one's origins is always uncertain.[52]

Therefore, for authors who acknowledge the triple role of Jew-Pole-artist, the last of these identifications is the surest, and thus the most important. Through all the vacillations and changes, writing preserves its immutable and enduring meaning.

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47 Ibid., 22.

48 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 86.

49 This is Jan Błoński's term for the assimilationist worldview. See: Błoński, Jan, "Autoportret żydowski, czyli o żydowskiej szkole w literaturze polskiej," *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 85.

50 Ibid., 173.

51 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1985–1987*, 166.

52 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Przygody Robinsona*, 72–73.

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Such certainty is possible thanks to an exceptional and powerful bond with language. This bond seems almost to take an organic or corporeal form. Indeed, Brandys claims in *Months* that any foreign language would disconnect him from "a cerebral cortex formed from layers of Polish associations and impulses."[53] In an article entitled "The Literary Afterlife of Polish Jewry," Zygmunt Bauman describes this sense of finding succor or shelter in the space of language as the distinguishing feature of contemporary Polish-Jewish writers abroad.[54] Their repeated homage to the Polish language is no mere performance for the benefit of others, but rather a way of repeating to themselves a confession of faith in the grounding power of the word. These contemporary prose writers add their voices to the voices of earlier poets such as Julian Tuwim, Marian Hemar and Aleksander Wat. Perhaps Rozenfeld formulates this conviction most clearly. As he wanders between Poland and Israel, he regards himself as somebody who essentially belongs to a single place – as "a person living in language, in a specific place, in the word."[55] The Hebrew language – which he has learnt with difficulty and above all with reluctance – will always be a secondary tongue for him. His various euphoric projects – "I shall translate the psalms and Bialik!" – are accompanied by an equally euphoric remark: "I shall write in Polish!"[56] After all, this is precisely what translating from the Hebrew means for him. Existing in the Polish language presents itself as his ultimate and only artistic destiny. It is worth carefully reading the following scene from his memoirs: "I make my way to Krakow. At five a.m. I stand by the Cloth Hall on the main square with tears in my eyes. 'I'm finally here,' I tell the statue of Mickiewicz. 'You see, I've returned.'"[57] This return to the city of Krakow – which turns out to be the center of Polishness, partly because the statue of the national bard stands at its core – essentially represents the author's return to his own role as a poet.

"He is equally a Jew, a Pole and an artist," says Brandys of Adolf Rudnicki, before adding the following observations:

> The central conflict is concentrated in these three forms, in this triple engagement in the drama of history. He is defined three times and he knows this in three ways. This triple consciousness pulses in every passage of his prose, setting the direction or path towards his main theme.[58]

It was not only for Brandys (though Sandauer clearly disagreed) that Rudnicki personified the fulfillment of this triple fate, thus appearing to hold the secret to a remarkable art that would be simultaneously Polish and Jewish. Recalling his own literary youth as an avant-garde internationalist, Aleksander Wat jealously admits that among all the interwar writers only Rudnicki did not cut his ties with the Jewish people or with Jewish culture:

53 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982–1984*, 24.

54 Bauman, Zygmunt, "The Literary Afterlife of Polish Jewry," *Polin* 7 (1992).

55 Rozenfeld, *Podanie o prawo powrotu*, 5.

56 Ibid., 38.

57 Ibid., 68.

58 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Zapamiętane*, 18–19.

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> He alone was not a renegade – neither personally nor as the second or third generation to rebel. He escaped the ghetto and his father's house, amused himself with noblemen, but always in the role of a prodigal son. He knew that his father and the fattened calf and a degraded elder brother – like Esau next to Jacob – were waiting at home.[59]

So what was the basis of Rudnicki's secret? He is admired for his faithfulness as a writer to Jewish experience, for his search for the artistic truth about the Jewish world, for the authenticity of his own place within it, and – above all – for his witness to the Holocaust. Jan Kott would later write in his reminiscences on the *Kuźnica* weekly magazine that Rudnicki "had a different kind of sensitivity and a different conscience from the rest of us, perhaps because he was still deeply affected by the extermination of his nation."[60]

Other authors were only beginning to learn about their Jewishness (the Brandys brothers mention various readings in Jewish studies in their diaries), since they had invested their earlier interests in other areas of literature. For these writers, personal documentary literature seemed to be the only way to approach Rudnicki's model of writing, since this genre preserved the form of private Jewish experience. Therefore, it is no surprise that an attachment to Jewish themes appears as an important element in the image of the author created in Kazimierz Brandy's *Months*. He records these themes as the opinions of an outsider: "Why do you keep coming back to these problems? Jews, anti-Semitism – do you really have to write about this?"[61] The diaries of Marian Brandys – on the other hand – record his friends' attempts to persuade him to make "the fate of a Pole of Jewish origin, whom they would deny any right to Polishness" the main theme of his notes. According to his friends: "Nobody is as well qualified for this task as you. Nobody could do it better than you."[62]

In 1981, when Jan Błoński published the first, censored version of his now classic article on the "Jewish school" in contemporary Polish prose (entitled "Jewish Self-Portrait: On the Jewish School in Polish Literature" ["Autoportret żydowski, czyli o żydowskiej szkole w literaturze polskiej"]), the wave of personal documentary literature was just beginning to rise. One of the factors in the formation of this movement was a growing interest in Jewish matters characteristic of the political climate in the 1980s. This shift recovered certain subjects that had been purged from social memory for various political and non-political reasons. The new interest also sprang partly from the situation on the artistic market – specifically, the increasing status of this kind of writing among readers, thanks to which it moved from its earlier marginal position towards the center of the literary scene.[63] Indeed, it is striking that so many of these memoirs came out precisely in the 1990s – including Hen's *Nowolipie Street* and Julian Stryjkowski's *The Same, But Different* (*To samo, ale inaczej*), which both revealed how deeply immersed the earlier

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59 Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 244.

60 Kott, Jan, *Przyczynek do biografii. Zawał* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 217.

61 Brandys, Kazimierz, *Miesiące 1982–1984*, 145.

62 Brandys, Marian, *Dziennik 1978* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1997), 34.

63 Jarosiński, Zbigniew, "Proza dokumentu osobistego," *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury*, eds. A. Brodska and K. Burska (Warszawa: IBL, 1998).

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novels by these authors had been in the autobiographical element (Hen's *Herod's Theater* [*Teatr Heroda*] and Stryjkowski's *The Great Fear* [*Wielki strach*]).[64] Certain other writers – such as Vogler and Sandauer – published several versions of their autobiographies, supplementing and commenting on their earlier autobiographies.

Two decades later, we can see quite clearly that personal records have complemented and enriched the prose of the Jewish school in a vital way. Above all, they have complemented and enriched the theme of identity, which absorbed Jewish prose artists from the very earliest novels by Wilhelm Feldman, Michał Mutermilch, and Aniela Kallas. These writers at the beginning of the twentieth century were already setting their creative works in literary or journalistic milieus. In fact, one might compile an exemplary biography of a "borderline writer" from diverse episodes scattered throughout various works over the course of the century. In his novel *A Stolen Biography* (*Czas zatrzymany do wyjaśnienia*, 1987), Szymon Szechter symbolically depicts his double identity as the bond linking a small boy with an adult man, a Jew with a Pole: "little Józef Hirszfeld, who grew up into Józef Potoczek," and "Józef Potoczek, who grew out of little Józef Hirszfeld."[65]

In its focus on expressing the "I," personal documentary literature today seems to occupy a place that once belonged to psychological prose.[66] By examining the dilemmas of identity from the inside, this genre depicts the subjective aspect of identity, recording its dynamic nature and mutable forms, which depend on varying states of consciousness and on time. Here we find authors speaking about themselves (and about others) as Poles, Jews or Polish writers, explaining when and why they feel like Jews, Poles or Polish Jews, while also revealing why they always feel like Polish writers. Thanks to these authors, personal documentary literature has become a space for grounding and constructing a complex Polish-Jewish identity – which ultimately becomes possible through art.

Translation: Stanley Bill

[64] Ibid., 341.

[65] Szechter, Szymon, *Czas zatrzymany do wyjaśnienia* (London: Kontra, 1981), 169.

[66] Zbigniew Jarosiński writes about this possibility in "Proza dokumentu osobistego" (134).

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