

Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs  
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

## *Wresting the past from fictions and legends...* Challenges for memory and education about the Holocaust in post-1989 Poland

*Those who are still alive, receive a mandate from those who are silent forever. They can fulfill their duties only by trying to reconstruct precisely things as they were by wresting the past from fictions and legends.*

Czesław Miłosz, Nobel lecture, quoted after: Hartman, Geoffrey H. (1994), "Introduction: Darkness Visible" In: Hartman Geoffrey (ed.) (1994), *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shape of Memory*, Cambridge, Blackwell, 8.

### Introduction

The world's symbol of the Holocaust is Auschwitz, a camp initially set up for Polish prisoners, which, together with Auschwitz II – Birkenau, became the largest site of genocide, where between June 1940 and January 1945 from 1.1 to 1.5 million people were murdered, 90% of them Jews. Auschwitz is the largest Jewish cemetery in the world and also the largest Polish cemetery. It has become a universal symbol of terror. And, as Ruth Ellen Gruber (2002, 32) wrote, "The Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp complex has been a political and emotional battleground of memory since the end of the war". Is there a way to remember inclusively, to reconcile these memories or communities of memory, or will they always be mutually exclusive?

"The Holocaust provides us", says Sybil Milton (2000, 14–15), "with an awareness that democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained; and that the Holocaust occurred because individuals, organisations, and governments made a choice

which legalised discrimination and permitted hatred and murder to occur". To remember the victims of the Holocaust and other victims of National Socialism, to increase awareness of the Holocaust, and to fulfil our responsibility to future generations, are the mission of many Polish museums, memorial sites, academic institutions and non-governmental organisations.

## I. The past and how it is remembered

As Thomas Lutz and co-authors (2005) stated, "Remembrance of the murder of the European Jewry is most effective when it is linked with the specific cultures of remembrance in each country. Memorial sites are places of remembrance of victims, educational centers and sites of political interest. They are centered on the history of a specific site". Poland's history of Nazi occupation left the country with "several thousand memorial sites and about a dozen memorial museums" (Kranz, 108) where people could be taught about the Holocaust, but for 45 years, except for research, there was silence about Jewish subjects in Polish schools, the media, the Church and in families; the national memory of the Holocaust was made officially nonexistent. Family memories and personal memories still vivid after World War II were suppressed, denied, distorted and falsified as the years went by. The destruction of whole Jewish districts in Warsaw, Lublin and many other Polish towns and cities made it easier for society to forget.

An empirical study in which the attitudes of Polish teenagers were surveyed 10 years after the fall of communism gave evidence of the years of suppression of the past, and indicated that some remnants of the conflict of memory still exist, as shown by their inconsistent attitudes toward the Holocaust and related topics. There was a lack of coherence between answers related to the Holocaust, attributable to the students' lack of knowledge about the topic, emotions related to patriotism, and the students' attachment to an image of the special role of Poles in history. The topic of the Holocaust clearly elicits conflicted feelings and engages defence mechanisms (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 2003).

The challenge to Poland after years of silence is to (re)construct the historical memory, not in isolation but as the shared, often painful Polish-Jewish memory, and to acknowledge that the destruction of 10% of Poland's citizens, Poles of Jewish origin, is an integral part of our national past. This process was activated in Poland in the 1990s.

Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 1992) suggested that memory of the past is an interpretative, meaning-making process framed by specific social groups – families, ethnic groups and nations. He believed that membership in social groups makes people acquire and recall memory in particular ways, and thus participate in "communities of memories".

Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1992, 23) and Pierre Nora (1989, 9) separate subjective memory from the objective history underlying it. There can be tensions or even opposition between them. Memory is a cultural competence, a condition for community participation (Szacka, 2000). Finally, memory is not only a descriptive category, but also a moral project (Bilewicz, 144).

For Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (2003, 118), the “community of memory” is not monolithic but pluralistic, allowing space for differences, especially when we do not have direct access to the past, as in the case of the Holocaust”. According to Charles S. Maier (1993, 136, 2001, 32) modern historical memory cannot be universal because “memory does not come in a social or political vacuum”, and communities of memory cannot empathise with the members of other communities of memory. In opposition to that statement, I will argue that Auschwitz–Birkenau, a cemetery without graves, can be a space for inclusive remembrance.

Saul Friedlander and Dominick LaCapra have made pioneering contributions to our understanding of Holocaust memory. Dominick LaCapra emphasized that no single narrative of the Holocaust can emerge, and that there must be a multitude of perspectives and approaches, in order to prevent any rigid meaning from developing. But an emphasis on diverse approaches runs the risk of relativization.

*The memory of our griefs prevents us from seeing the suffering of others; it justifies our present actions in the name of past suffering.*

S. Rezvani, *La Traverse des Monts Noirs*, Paris, 1992, 264; after Todorov, ‘The Abuses of Memory’, *Common Knowledge* 5 (Spring 1996), 23.

## II. Divergent trajectories<sup>1</sup> of Polish and Jewish memories

According to Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi (1996) the narratives of the past of Poles, Catholics, Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews are mutually exclusive. This is a pessimistic view, and worth challenging. For Poles and Jews the memory of World War II is an important component of national identity. During the conference of the European Association of Wilson Center Alumni in 1998 in Cracow, Shlomo Avineri stated that for Poles, who were murdered both by the Nazis and the Soviets, Katyń was and is more important than the Holocaust (see: Roszkowski, 2000, 101). Polish and Jewish collective memories created divergent images of mutual relations during World War II. In Jewish eyes the Poles were indifferent, taking advantage of Jews, often glad of the Jewish fate, and sometimes actively helping the Nazis. “Jews who survived in Poland kept silent, and those who emigrated wanted to forget about Poland as quickly as possible” (Szlajfer, 14).

The memory of the camps is not the same thing as the memory of the Holocaust; it relates to survivors who often are not Jewish. It has been engraved in the consciousness of the Polish nation, expressed in thousands of memoirs, and published in books and articles in Poland (Frankowski, 1996, 5). “Polish national memory and Jewish memory haunt many of the same places” (Hartman, 1994, 7). “By creating common spaces for memory, monuments propagate the illusion of common memory”, warned James Young (2003, 6). This warning applies to memorial sites such as the former Auschwitz camp.

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<sup>1</sup> Term used by Dariusz Stola (2000, 95).

Educational programs at memorial sites, responsibly carried out, can overcome this illusion. In doing this they can teach understanding of the memories of others.

### III. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

Polish educators are intensifying their efforts to teach about the Holocaust, but they are still at the beginning of their task. Education at memorial sites is about modelling the attitudes of young people through “more direct contacts with the reality of the past”, as expressed by the Chairman of the International Task Force during Italian Presidency Ambassador Giorgio Franchetti Pardo<sup>2</sup>. This contact can be achieved through different means including youth exchange, contests, meetings with survivors, exhibitions, and student journalism. The strength of these programs and projects is that they cross boundaries, involving civil society in this work.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum has been contributing significantly to Holocaust remembrance and education. Created and developed through the efforts of former prisoners, established “for all time” by act of the Polish Parliament, it has been visited by more than 30 million people since 1947. About 60% of the visitors are youth. In 2006, the year of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the camp’s liberation, it was visited by more than 760,000 people. In 2007, 1.22 million people visited the Museum. After 1989, new explanatory material was introduced, to make it clear that mostly Jews were killed there (almost one million) and that 75,000 of the victims were Poles. Educational tasks are a priority of the Museum’s activity. Visits to Auschwitz are a powerful experience for many young people, affecting their moral choices in the future. One of them, 19-year-old Sabina Stec of Poland, wrote ‘The war is over, but in Auschwitz the trees, the flowers and the birds beg us to remember. We clear the old camp paths, and we don’t just carry away earth, we also discover the people’<sup>3</sup>. Former prisoners also come to the Museum as guest lecturers.

To better fulfil the task of conveying the truth about Auschwitz to the next generations, the International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust was established on May 13, 2005. It is a part of the structure of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. The Center gives a chance to evoke and reconcile the different memories of the place. It has three sections: program, information, and visitor service. Their work is focused on three main goals. The first is to address historical memory by teaching facts; the second is to address historical awareness by developing the competence to evaluate causes and consequences of actions; the third is to foster civic responsibility by promoting positive attitudes and developing a sense of active citizenship. The Center’s target groups are teachers, students, religion teachers, curators and guides.

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<sup>2</sup> Statement “The Role of Education” prepared for the OSCE conference on Anti-Semitism, Berlin 28-29 April, 2004 (manuscript distributed at the request of France; PC.DEL/321/04).

<sup>3</sup> Text from the exhibition ‘Afterwards, It’s Just a Part of You’ reflecting feelings about the effect of a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The exhibition was part of a joint project of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and the International Youth Meeting Center in Oświęcim.

Among the Museum's specialised education activities are postgraduate studies co-organised for the past seven years with the Pedagogical Academy in Cracow, entitled *Totalitarianism – Nazism – Holocaust*, annually attended by 40 public school teachers, religion teachers and educators. Currently the studies last three semesters and provide 350 hours of teaching.

Thematic conferences, for example on the topic of Jews from Oświęcim or the Alte Judenrampe, are aimed at teachers who are graduate students at the Museum. There are two-week seminars for 20 Polish teachers and 20 guides and curators at Yad Vashem (120 hours), with pre-seminars and post-seminars at the Museum, a one-week seminar in co-operation with Yad Vashem and the Ministry of Education of Israel for 25 Israeli teachers at the Museum, and the seminar “The complexity of Auschwitz symbolism”. Among the other continuing educational activities are courses at the Memorial Site for teachers from Romania, the Czech Republic and Lithuania, academic camps, literature and photography contests, lectures and workshops for youth. The latter include “Auschwitz – history and symbolism” and “Auschwitz –my homeland. History and memory after 60 years. In search of a stolen some”. In this last project, a result of co-operation between the Center, the International Youth Meeting Center (IYMC) in Oświęcim, and the In-Service Teacher Training Centre in Cracow, local history is accented and personal stories are recalled. The publications include four brochures in two languages, with versions on CD as well: “Main aspects of the Nazi occupation on Polish land”, “Man in Auschwitz – the fate of a prisoner based on camp documents, testimonies and art”, “Women in KL Auschwitz”, and “Art in Auschwitz”.

Educational projects are also carried out in co-operation with international organizations and foreign institutions such as the Task Force, Yad Vashem, the Council of Europe and House of the Wannsee Conference. Local organizations located in Oświęcim are closely involved: the International Youth Meeting Center, the Center for Dialogue and Prayer, and the Auschwitz Jewish Center. Also participating are Polish higher education establishments, in-service teacher training centres, boards of education and other institutions. In 2005, Museum educators and invited speakers gave 400 lectures and workshops. An agreement for a program of co-operation between the Museum and the Jagiellonian University in Cracow was signed in 2005. In 2007, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, took place a conference on Auschwitz and Holocaust memory, studies and methodology of teaching about Auschwitz, the Holocaust and other genocides.

#### IV. Education at other memorial sites and projects of non-governmental organisations

One recent international project, initiated by the University of Warsaw School of Journalism students, is called *Europe According to Auschwitz*, was aimed at preparing the *Death Camp Chronicle/Reportage*, focusing on important events from the camp's

history, by an international group formed through co-operation between university-level journalism schools from Germany, Hungary, the U.S.A., Israel, Russia and Poland. It tells the story of the good and evil that lies dormant in human nature. Auschwitz interests the students in this project not only as a deviation of humanity but as a system, an institution. The project gives students a chance to work on an important subject, search archives, grasp the shape of events, and speak with and collect materials from surviving eyewitnesses. Several works have been produced already, reflecting daily life in Auschwitz, among them “The longest roll call in the history of KL Auschwitz”, “Rudolf Hoess, commandant of KL Auschwitz”, and “The story of Mala Zimetbaum and Edward Galiński”, available at the project website<sup>4</sup>.

The March of the Living is an international program that brings Jewish teenagers from all over the world to Poland on Holocaust Memorial Day to march from Auschwitz to Birkenau, and to bring them to Israel to observe Israeli Memorial Day and Israeli Independence Day. The lack of wider contacts between Poles and Israelis for 40 years helped create two separate versions of history<sup>5</sup>. The tenth March of the Living in 1998, in which 7,000 young Jews from all over the world participated, together with the prime ministers of Poland and Israel, the marshal of the lower house of the Polish parliament, some MPs, and groups of young non-Jewish Poles, was a breakthrough. It was a sign of the new openness, the first time that the Israeli organizers invited Polish youth to join the March. Initially their participation was restricted mostly to marching side by side, and was seldom accompanied by meetings and talks. Due to the efforts of the Israeli Embassy in Warsaw, the Polish government, NGOs, and educators from both Poland and Israel, Polish and Israeli youth were given opportunities to exchange views and discuss history. As an outcome of such meetings, the *Difficult Questions* project of the Forum of Dialogue among Nations, rooted in real questions asked by youth, was developed. Questions were addressed by an international group of prominent scholars, and their answers will be compiled in book form. In 2005, the March of the Living gathered more than 20,000 young participants from all over the world, and Polish youth walked in the same blue jackets as their Jewish peers.

What unites Jewish NGOs in Poland is a deep belief that for young Israelis coming to Poland the country should not be seen only as a Jewish cemetery. There is a need to show them past and current Jewish life in Poland, to show them that there is continuity (two Jewish schools in Warsaw, one in Wrocław, NGOs). The annual Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow, although created by non-Jews and drawing mainly non-Jews, shows that Jewish culture is attractive in this part of the world where there are almost no Jews. This “virtual” Jewish culture (Gruber, 2002) is a sign of nostalgia for a world that has disappeared.

The International Youth Meeting Center (IYMC), located just outside the former camp, was founded in 1986. It brings together young people from German and Polish schools, encouraging them to draw lessons from the events that took place in Auschwitz and build a better future. In addition to presenting historical material, the project informs young people about current threats to democracy and human rights.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.reporter.id.uw.edu.pl/article/archive/295/>

<sup>5</sup> There were no diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel between 1967 and 1999.

Research on the methodology of teaching about the Holocaust has led to the conclusion that education should be individualized and based on empathy, using active techniques to spark the students' imagination and to allow close contact with history (Ehmann et al., 1995, Brinkmann et al., 2000). Memorial sites provide such contact. They also provide opportunities to engage visitors and facilitate “deep and authentic meaning-making that continues beyond the site visit”<sup>6</sup>.

In Poland there is special emphasis on education at memorial sites. In June 2004 the Bełżec Memorial was opened. It was built with funds from the Polish government Council for Protection of Sites of Struggle and Martyrdom and from the American Jewish Committee. “This monument takes away layers of lies and misunderstandings”, said Rabbi Andrew Baker, Director for International Affairs of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) during the opening ceremony. He continued, “in creating this monument we have managed to reconcile Jews and Poles, the generation of the Holocaust with their descendants, those who survived with families from all over the world, aiming at passing on our memory and recollection to those who visit this place”<sup>7</sup>.

The Stutthof Museum in Sztutowo organizes seminars for teachers, guided tours for students, and film showings. The exhibition “Sobibór Death Camp”, co-organized by the Anne Frank Foundation and the Netherlands Institute of War documentation, is presented at the Museum of the Former Sobibór Death Camp.

The Department of Education of the State Museum at Majdanek offers lessons at the Museum for students focusing on one specific subject, educational seminars for teachers and students, history workshops on “The Lublin Region in Nazi Policy”, lectures and meetings with camp ex-prisoners, and documentary film showings about the war and the camps in Polish, English, French, German and Russian versions.

The City Gate – Theater NN Centre, founded in 1990, is a local government cultural institute in Lublin, working for preservation of the cultural heritage and for education. Numerous projects keep alive the memory that before the war a third of the inhabitants of Lublin were Jews, almost all of whom perished in the Bełżec camp. In one project, Polish school children sent 500 letters to Henio Żytomirski, a ten-year old Polish-Jewish boy murdered at Majdanek in 1942. Then the children, and their families, received the letters returned to them, stamped “no such address, addressee unknown”, raising awareness and creating discussion about the absence of Lublin's Jewish population.

## Concluding remarks

(Re)construction of the memory of the Holocaust in Poland is a complex process, not a linear but rather a zigzagging one. Painful facts are approached, possible causes of conflict are avoided. It is an emotionally charged process which was initiated with the

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<sup>6</sup> Todd Norden D., *A Constructivist Model for Public War Memorial Design that Facilitates Dynamic Meaning Making*, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www/forum-znak.org.pl/index-en.php?t=wydarzenia&id=1574>



removal of the taboo about discussing the Holocaust in the Polish media, public debate, and education.

Can sites of memory, museums, centers of education and civic organizations in post-1989 Poland create spaces where communities of memory can integrate, or will our society continue to be characterized by rivalry between competing memories? Can those institutions join history and memory at all? How can education about the Holocaust deal with the Polish national sense of martyrdom, and how can the dark sides of history be incorporated into the collective self-image of Poles without creating divisions? How can facts and events repressed or dismissed from the individual and collective memory be reintegrated into consciousness? These are questions which are being addressed by practical efforts in my country today.

“Until fairly recently, the Holocaust and its commemoration were regarded as a Jewish affair, detached from the general flow of European national history and national memory”, says Ruth E. Gruber in an article for the *Global News Service of the Jewish people*<sup>8</sup>. The current approach to Holocaust education in Poland is that the Holocaust is a Polish and a European issue, not a strictly Jewish one, and this is reflected in the numerous initiatives on various levels related to visits to memorial sites. Such an approach is dominant in education conducted by NGOs, and is less prominent in public schools.

Memorial sites play a fundamental role in the formation of the European culture of memory (Kranz, 101). They provide narration, documentation and explanation of the site itself. They provide an impulse for reflection on “the banality of evil”, awakening sensitivity towards all forms of intolerance and xenophobia. They have a stronger effect on emotions than the schools do (Kranz, 110–111). This work should be grounded in the historical context, but if we look only at past events we may lose the dimension of contemporary responsibility and overlook current threats. The Holocaust is a European legacy which should influence the political culture of contemporary societies (Kranz, 2002, 104).

Education about the Holocaust in Poland varies between two approaches: one perceives the Holocaust as a metaphor for all genocides, and the other sees it as local, regional history, as genocide that happened right here, before our parents’ and grandparents’ eyes. Like most teaching in Poland, however, teaching about the Holocaust usually is not aimed at the natural curiosity, creativity and interests of the child, and does not encourage active participation or original thought. The City Gate – NN Theatre letter-writing project for schoolchildren is one of examples of good practice. Learning history in an authentic way is more powerful than reading about events in a textbook. The role of the teacher in a visitor-oriented approach to education at memorial sites is radically different from the traditional classroom role. Instead of teaching ex-cathedra, the teacher is involved in the educational process as a consultant or a moderator. Teaching in the traditional, conventional format about the genocide, namely transmitting knowledge, is very limited and does not present the subject in all its depth.

Today the Holocaust in Poland is taught by many means outside the classroom, developed and implemented by NGOs and even non-formal groups. There are hundreds of such projects all over Poland<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.jta.org/page\\_view\\_story.asp?intarticleid=14045&intcategoryid=2](http://www.jta.org/page_view_story.asp?intarticleid=14045&intcategoryid=2)

<sup>9</sup> Guidelines for in-class and out-of-class follow-up learning have been tested in practice. These activities include co-operative learning, independent student research in a library or archives, thematic seminars



Memorial sites transmit the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust. They have a unique potential to confront us with the darkest past of European history and with the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Wrestling the past from fictions and legends, as Miłosz called upon us to do, is the mandate of all memorial sites, and it is a special task for places that hold the memories of distinct ethnic and religious “communities of memory”, like Auschwitz-Birkenau. Their mandate should not be obscured by conflicts of memory. On the contrary, they should respect the value of all these memories, should correct their distortions, and should integrate them among different communities and within the individual, to make a better civil society and better citizens.

Respect, correct and integrate, in order to create a future in which, to paraphrase the words of Prof. Yehuda Bauer spoken at the United Nations on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, we will not be perpetrators, will not be victims, and will never, but never, be bystanders.

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and workshops, project work using museum collections, school exhibitions with photographs or art, theatre presentations, oral history projects, articles, poems, and film scenarios. Students may participate in restoration and maintenance work at memorial sites.

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