

CzasKultury/English

**Spectres of the
Holocaust**

Sylwia Karolak

2/2013

Spectres of the Holocaust

Sylvia Karolak

We live in a special place. The space of our present existence was once complemented by Europe's largest Jewish community, numbering 3.2 million people. It is not enough to say that this group is no longer to be found in Poland. Poland was where the Nazis committed racially motivated murder on an unimaginable scale, killing nearly 4 million European Jews, including 98% of all Polish Jews. It was here that ghettos were set up and then "liquidated." It was here that Jews escaping from transports or hiding on the "Aryan side" were pursued.

I study a map of contemporary Warsaw on which a red line indicates where the ghetto walls used to be. To the left, on Okopowa Street, somewhere between Powazkowska Street, Mlynarska Street and Zytnia Street, one can see the Jewish Cemetery. Indeed, this space is described on the map as a "cemetery." But when I look at the Warsaw Ghetto, where 380,000 Warsaw Jews, approximately 29% of all Warsaw residents, were crowded together and then annihilated, I realize that the Jewish cemetery covers an

area much larger than that indicated on the map: it encompasses most of Warsaw and even Poland.

Seven decades have passed since the end of the events that culminated in the Holocaust. Those who survived are passing away, as are the last non-Jewish witnesses. The Holocaust belongs more and more to the world of the dead. It is an event one reads about in the biographies of those who are no longer with us. “The end of the era of memory”¹ was proclaimed long ago. Voices claiming that “the memory of the Holocaust today is no longer a memory!”² are prevailing. The living are left with post-memory, which is built out of images and narratives, representations of that which no longer exists; it is built on grim specters of the past.³

“haunted house”

In an essay entitled “The Haunted World,” Zygmunt Bauman observes that “the ghost of the Holocaust haunts the world and a world haunted by a ghost is a haunted world,”⁴ which “has not become safer, nobler or more ethical than it was before gas chambers and crematoria were built.”⁵

¹ J. Leociak, “Koniec ery pamięci”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 50/2011, quoted in: http://tygodnik.onet.pl/33,0,71562,koniec_ery_pamieci,artykul.html (accessed: 20.03.2013).

² K. Bojarska, “Historia Zagłady i literatura (nie)piękna: ‘Tworci’ Marka Bieńczyka w kontekście kultury posttraumatycznej”, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2/2008, p. 89.

³ I refer here to: M. Hirsch, “Mourning and Postmemory”, [in:] M. Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 17–40.

⁴ Z. Bauman, “The Haunted World”, [in:] Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Krystyna Oleksy (eds.), *Pamięć. Świadomość. Odpowiedzialność. Remembrance. Awareness, Responsibility. Międzynarodowa konferencja z okazji 60. rocznicy utworzenia Muzeum, Oświęcim, 2-4 lipca 2007 rok. Oświęcim 2007*, p. 271. The first version of the essay in Polish was published in 1999 in *Midrasz* (no. 9).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

Humanity did not learn its lesson. The negative impact that past events have had on the present is difficult to describe and name. According to Bauman, humanity is in the power of demons against which “no exorcism has been found.”⁶ The imagination of man is haunted and demoralized; it is able to plan the next genocide. Another specter of the past is the belief that the most important thing is to survive at any cost, at the cost of others, even at the cost of someone else’s death. A specter of the past is the belief that those who survived can and should live, while others were labeled as being among the “condemned”, and were not “on the list” of survivors. In the context of the present essay, the remarks found in “The Haunted World” that relate directly to the situation in Poland seem particularly relevant. According to Bauman, those Poles who unlawfully took Jewish property understandably feared that the owners might demand its return. The first “return of the dead” took place in Poland shortly after the war, when the surviving Jews came back to their former homes. Their sudden and unexpected reappearance was met with questions such as: “What? Are they still alive?”⁷ In this sense, the Kielce Pogrom becomes “understandable” because “the fear of losing stolen property could indeed push many people into participating in the murder and chasing away thousands of ghostly relics of the robbed nation.”⁸

⁶ Ibidem, p. 279.

⁷ M. Steinlauf, “Pamięć poraniona 1944–1948”, [in:] *Pamięć nieprzyswojona. Polska pamięć Zagłady*, Warsaw 2001, p. 69.

⁸ Z. Bauman, “The Haunted World”, op. cit., p. 275.

In order to talk about places where the ghost of the Holocaust can find shelter, Bauman employs the meaningful metaphors of “dark attics and dark corners, where the ghost may wander, hiding from its exorcists” and states that these places “grow in numbers rather than disappear.”⁹ Bauman lists as the ghost’s possible hiding places: the house (“attic”) and the street (“alley”).

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir uses similar metaphors, writing about a “haunted house,” a “house in which one no longer wants to live.” Tokarska-Bakir asks “how is it possible that time goes by, war and the Holocaust become distant, and yet the dead grow closer to us?”¹⁰ She answers this question by quoting Dominick La Capra, who claims that the ghosts in question “are in fact issues which haunt us. These ghosts roam around our post-traumatic world as a result of disturbances in the symbolic order, a lack of rituals, or deaths so transgressive and incomprehensible that they are difficult or even impossible to process during the time of mourning. In fact, no one, no individual or group, can claim exclusive rights to them. If they haunt someone’s house (a nation or a group), they bother all its residents, even those who have lived there only for a short while.”¹¹

According to Jacques Derrida,¹² the specter “plays a deconstructive role of that which is between life and death,

⁹ Ibidem, p. 279.

¹⁰ J. Tokarska-Bakir, “Historia jako fetysz”, [in:] J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste. Eseje i studia*, Sejny 2004, p. 97.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 98.

¹² I base my text on the discussion of Derrida’s ontology of the spectral found in: A. Marzec, “Widma, zjawy i nawiedzone teksty – hauntologia Jacquesa Derridy, czyli o pośmiertnym

presence and absence, existence and non-existence.”¹³ “Textual ghosts” are not yet buried (not yet interpreted) issues. Derrida points out that “reality is not as consistent as we would like it to be.”¹⁴ Textual traces of the other allow one to ask the following question: “how to give voice to that which is gone, to that whose power of influence weakened but was never exhausted. [...] How to talk with that which is not completely dead, which no longer has the strength to be fully present, but is still too powerful to just go away and disappear.”¹⁵

In her discussion of post-memory, Katarzyna Bojarska observes that in the Polish context this term “is particularly important if we take into account the peculiar haunting of ‘space’ by the ‘strangeness’ of events that took place in it.” Bojarska claims that post-memory has its roots in, among others, “places marked by the Holocaust, camps, monuments, museums and material relics of the Jewish world exhibited in them,” as well as in “numerous traces of what the Holocaust left behind in the structure of cities and towns.”¹⁶

It is in the context of post-memory, but also of haunting, which affects not only space but also the individual, that Hanna Krall’s short story “Dybbuk” emerges as meaningful. Suffice it to mention at this point that the Hebrew

życiu literatury”, [in:] M. Garbacik, P. Kawulok, A. Nowakowski, N. Palich, T. Surdykowski (eds.), *Wymiary powrotu w literaturze*, Cracow 2012, pp. 255–262.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 259.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 260.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ K. Bojarska, *Historia Zagłady...*, op. cit., p. 90.

word *dybbuk* means “to adhere” or “to cling.” A *dybbuk* is a soul which cannot rest after death, but instead takes possession of the body of a living person and begins to speak with its mouth.¹⁷ The protagonist of the story, an American named Adam S., is possessed by his namesake: his half-brother who was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto. The *dybbuk* speaks Polish. It becomes angry, laughs, screams and cries in its own voice: the voice of a child which comes out of the body of an older brother. The ghost tells its own story: “I know who cried and why. When they cast him out of his hiding place, he stood in the street and cried.”¹⁸ Adam S. initially wants to get rid of the *dybbuk*, but at the last minute changes his mind and wants his brother to stay with him.¹⁹

“stories that haunt us”

It can be said that the subject of the Holocaust has constantly been present in Polish literature, both in the era of memory and post-memory.

A look at the canon, at the list of books read and discussed in the decades after the war, shows that initially only witnesses were given a voice. Although stories about the ex-

¹⁷ I base my description on the following publications: Z. Borzymińska, R. Żebrowski (eds.), *Polski słownik judaistyczny: dzieje, kultura, religia, ludzie*, vol. 1, Warsaw 2003, p. 354; J.H. Schoeps (ed.), *Nowy leksykon judaistyczny*, translated by S. Lisiecka, Warsaw 2007, p. 206; T. Gadacz (ed.), *Religia. Encyklopedia PWN*, vol. 3, Warsaw 2001, p. 322.

¹⁸ H. Krall, “Dybuk”, [in:] H. Krall, *Dowody na istnienie*, Poznań 1995. Quoted after: H. Krall, *Portret z kulą w szczęce i inne historie*, Warsaw 2008, p. 102.

¹⁹ “Poczułem żal. – Chcesz ode mnie odejść? – powiedziałem. – Zostań. Jesteś moim bratem, nie odchodź. On jakby na to czekał. Zawrócił, jednym szybkim ruchem wskoczył na mnie – i przestałem go widzieć” [I felt sorry. –Do you want to leave me?, I asked. – Stay. You’re my brother, don’t go. He listened attentively. He turned back and with one swift movement jumped inside me – and I couldn’t see him anymore], *Ibidem*, p. 101.

termination of Jews written from the perspective of an observer were published, they were consistently overlooked in the reception: Jewish victims “fed” the registers of Polish war victims. Mainly Poles died in the camps (which were intentionally designated as concentration camps, not death camps). The (Warsaw) Ghetto became a symbol of the Holocaust, but it was presented in a specific way: the benefits that Poles derived from the establishment of the Jewish Quarter were never mentioned, the problem of blackmailing Jews who were hiding was disregarded (if it came up, it was usually in the context of criminals, outcasts, and not the majority of the population, the so-called respectable citizens – supposedly they only engaged in rescuing Jews), the indifference of Poles to what happened to their Jewish neighbors was never addressed. Similarly, the third phase of the Holocaust, which took place outside the big cities, in towns and villages, was ignored. The uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto was publicized, but it was interpreted in accordance with the then accepted reading, which falsified the true picture of the events: the uprising was considered a Polish uprising; the act of Jewish fighters was interpreted in accordance with the Polish insurgent myth. All of these “procedures” were adopted to maintain the myth of Polish martyrdom, as well as being a response to the “collective need to feel like a nation made up entirely of victims and heroes. [...] Hence, the Holocaust, a sensitive and delicate issue, was intentionally overlooked in collective memory.”²⁰ In space haunted by “extraordinary” events, but also by “cruel” attitudes, the voices of Jewish

²⁰ P. Forecki, *Od “Shoah” do “Strachu”. Spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych*, Poznań 2010, p. 113.

victims were silenced. Indeed, works dealing extensively with the Holocaust (*Medaliony* [Medallions] by Zofia Nalkowska, short stories by Tadeusz Borowski) could be read in accordance with the official interpretation of the (non) memory of the Holocaust, because the ethnic identity of the victims was not specified in the texts. If the reader lacked adequate knowledge, or sufficient good will, they read these works universally. Although the 1980s and early 1990s “acknowledged” this problem, it turns out that our house is still haunted. *Neighbors* and *Golden Harvest* scared us (despite the fact that Polish literature discovered the problem of “Jewish gold” long before Jan T. Gross). Interestingly enough, this aspect of haunting can be seen even today in the discussion surrounding the movie *Aftermath* directed by Władysław Pasikowski. Some have voiced the opinion that the film helps Jews who wish to recover their property in Poland. How many other specters are hidden in the nooks and corners of our house? Unprocessed past events constantly return. We live in a haunted house, not only because it was in Poland that the Holocaust took place, but also because of secrets, matters from the shared Polish-Jewish past that we cannot discuss, that we are trying to hide and bury. The past haunts our present. Other ghosts appear in our haunted house time after time. We are trying to flee from them.

“they stand there looking at me”

It seems that it is in the “late” testimonies, the accounts of those who survived the Holocaust as children, that authors first attempt to emphasize the distinct character of

Jewish deaths, differentiating between Jewish and Polish Holocaust victims. At the same time, a conviction arose that writing about the Holocaust is like communing with the dead: one remains suspended between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Henryk Grynberg assumes the role of a “writer of the dead,” a “guardian of graves,” or as Marek Zaleski describes him, an example of the “living ‘dead.’”²¹

Bogdan Wojdowski in his *opus magnum* observes that “during the day you have to carry the weight of the dead who are dying now, and at night you have to carry the weight of the dead who died a long time ago.”²² In this situation, one might ask, after Jerzy Jedlicki, “do we throw bread to the dead so that they will stop haunting us or so that they will keep haunting us?”²³ Alina Molisak’s analysis of the image and symbolic importance of “the other side” depicted in *Chleb rzucony umarłym* [Bread Thrown to the Dead] is based on Swedenborg, and they way his “vision [...] sanctions the continuance of the past, which does not disappear but continues on ‘the other side.’ ‘The other side’ may therefore prove to be not so much a side on which death rules, a space of non-existence, but a side on which an image persists, as if kept outside time. In this perspective, ‘the other side’ would be an eternally existing space of the ghetto where the Holocaust continues.”²⁴

²¹ M. Zaleski, “Różnica”, [in:] M. Zaleski, *Formy pamięci*, Gdansk 2004, p. 157.

²² B. Wojdowski, *Chleb rzucony umarłym*, Wrocław 2005, p. 150.

²³ J. Jedlicki, “Dzieje doświadczone i dzieje zaświadczone”, [in:] Z. Stefanowski, J. Sławiński (eds.), *Dzieło literackie jako źródło historyczne*, Warsaw 1978, p. 362.

²⁴ A. Molisak, *Judaizm jako los: Rzecz o Bogdanie Wojdowskim*, Warsaw 2004, p. 162,

An entire generation of writers who did not experience the Holocaust, who did not live through the Second World War, describes the experiences of their families (Ewa Kuryluk, *Frascati*; Bożena Keff, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* [A Piece on Mother and the Fatherland];²⁵ Agata Tuszyńska, *Rodzinna historia lęku* [Family History of Fear];²⁶ Piotr Paziński, *Pensjonat* [Boardinghouse]) or write about the effect the Holocaust had on the places and communities in which they lived (Piotr Szewc, *Zagłada* [Extermination]; Igor Ostachowicz, *Noc Żywych Żydów* [Night of the Living Jews]; and Piotr Paziński, *Pensjonat*). Especially in *Noc żywych Żydów* and *Pensjonat*, differ as they may, one can observe how our life today is haunted by past events, how strong the presence is of those who passed away and its impact on the lives of successive generations.

Piotr Paziński's *Pensjonat* is full of ghosts.²⁷ The novel's protagonist visits a haunted boardinghouse. Remem-

footnote 131.

²⁵ The mother says: "odbija mi się trupem, a potem znów pustym" [I have burbs that smell like a dead body and then burbs without a taste]; B. Keff, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie*, Cracow 2008, p. 9.

²⁶ "Na spojeniu jesieni z zimą święto grobów. Nie zmarłych, ci są ze mną, ale grobów właśnie. [...] Poddaje się temu, sprzątanie uspokaja, w słodkim zapachu palonych świec, w słupie migotliwego powietrza poruszamy się jak polepieni czadem. Dzieci swoich zmarłych. [...] Groby zarosnięte czasem nie przestają mówić. Nie mam wątpliwości, że ich tam nie ma. [...] Coraz mniej ich tam, coraz więcej we mnie. Obecni w końcu tylko w nas, jeśli obecni" [When fall meets winter we celebrate graves. Not the dead, they are with me, but graves. [...] I give in to that [Polish custom of cleaning graves – S.K.], cleaning calms me down. In a sweet smell of burning candles, in flickering light, we move as if we were intoxicated with fumes. Children of their dead. [...] Graves overgrown with time keep talking. I am sure they are not in there. [...] Few of them are in there, the majority is in me. In the end, if they are present at all, they are present in us]; A. Tuszyńska, *Rodzinna historia lęku*, Cracow 2005, p. 402.

²⁷ They are ghosts of the past. *Pensjonat* is not just a Holocaust novel. "The time before the war, the Nazi occupation of Poland and the Holocaust, pre- and post-war emigration to Israel are just as important in the novel as the harsh post-war realities of life in communist

brance of the past, evoked by memories, places, memorabilia (e.g. old photographs) becomes an integral part of the narrator/protagonist's life, "the last link in the chain of generations."²⁸ It seems that there are no boundaries between the past and the present. The narrator/protagonist lives "in the shadows, among ghosts and with them – instead of living among fresh sunrays,"²⁹ among the dead who "stand there looking [...] when the day still blends with the night, on the edge of darkness, which pours over the abyss in black waves";³⁰ "as if I belonged to the generation of Mr. Abram and Mrs. Mala, as if there was no age difference between me and uncle Szymon, even the smallest gap that would separate our lives from each other. They kept me in a viselike grip."³¹ These two worlds overlap and coexist in the person of the narrator/protagonist who carries the burden of memory. He never asked questions about the past because it was too early, and now there is no one to ask because it is already too late. Now, as the protagonist admits, he does not remember much, the past is almost forgotten. Letters fade and gradually disappear. Voices are almost silent. It is hard to remember names, recognize faces. The narrator says that it is only thanks to stories told by someone who still remembers that "things that I could not previously see become almost visible".³²

Poland. The narrator successfully does not discriminate any era in favor of another." P. Huelle, "Piotr Paziński, 'Pensjonat'", quoted after: http://www.zeszytyliterackie.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=972&Itemid=88 (accessed: 20.03.2013).

²⁸ P. Paziński, *Pensjonat*, Warszawa 2010, p. 134.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 92.

Spaces are haunted by the past and the dead as well, including the boardinghouse itself. The protagonist came to the boardinghouse to stay for “a few days, a few moments, and stayed for a lifetime” (p. 128). In the family memory, Świętojerska Street did not change “as though it never ceased to exist” (p. 7). Old photographs document the places and spaces where Jews used to live. The protagonist even says “our Warsaw in its entirety!” continues to exist unchanged – a “melancholic landscape” (p. 74). However, the inevitable question must be asked: Where did the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto die? “Still in the ghetto? Or maybe they took them to Treblinka? (p. 50). Indeed, images cannot be created with too many unknowns. A bitter conclusion is that it is possible to save the world only if it allows it (p. 62).

Igor Ostachowicz’s *Noc żywych Żydów* takes place in the Muranów district in Warsaw. It is a special place for the memory of the Holocaust: the Warsaw Ghetto was located here. After the war, New Muranów was built on the ruins of the ghetto, with human remains still lying in cellars.³³ As Jacek Leociak observes, “the topographic features of modern Muranów are parenthesized; as if they formed a transparent veil that covers the experience proper.”³⁴

³³ *Muranów: życie na wielkim grobowcu*, Polish Radio Channel Two, <http://www.polskieradio.pl/8/1415/Artykul/722653,Muranow-zycie-na-wielkim-grobowcu> (accessed: 20.03.2013).

³⁴ B. Chomątowska, *Stacja Muranów*, Warsaw 2012, Quoted after: <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Czytajdalej/ChomatowskaStacjaMuranowfragmentksiazki/menuid-185.html> (accessed: 20.03.2013).

Ostachowicz shares this view. The author exploits the historical uniqueness of the neighborhood in literature.³⁵ The protagonist of *Noc żywych Żydów*, who lays tile but has a university degree, lives in a housing estate which was built on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto. In fact, he lives on a cemetery: “You are the first to go (...) because your house stands on the site of the last holy bunker”;³⁶ “this is a necropolis, a capital of the dead, the Powazki cemetery is a county town compared to this”.³⁷ It turns out that this space is haunted. First, one can hear a distant sound, and then the dead Warsaw Jews appear in the basement. Each of the undead for some reason cannot find eternal peace. They are deeply shocked, they “hold a grudge against God”, and include “those who worked for the police and Sonderkommandos”.³⁸ The undead Jews rise from their tombs because no one remembers them, “they have no families, no one will muse over them in their graves. The man needs some warmth and interest after death, especially after tragic death. Oh well and if the entire family, your mom, your dad, even your distant cousins are dead, if all your friends are dead, well, you cannot just lie in your grave.”³⁹

Muranów becomes a sea of rubble again, where a new Warsaw uprising is taking place. Jews take to the streets only to

³⁵ The narrator claims that other areas of the city, areas not traumatized by history, are only “distant suburbs whose history has for centuries been defined by cyclic crops of potato and onion.” . I. Ostachowicz, *Noc żywych Żydów*, Warsaw 2012, p. 75.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 63.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 80.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 87–88.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 203.

be attacked by nationalists and neo-Nazis. Few Poles want to defend them. The main character, *czółzenłan*, the son of an anti-Semite (“Yes, yes, you halfwit, my dad would say, where will you go if you don’t like your own kin, maybe to those in skullcaps if you like them so much? Be careful, maybe they will let you join them. [...] They need you just as they need a Palestinian on a bus, or perhaps less.”⁴⁰) realizes right from the start that Poles will not be happy with Jews reclaiming the city (“it’s scary just how many Polish rednecks and skinheads came to Warsaw. They roam the streets, catch the dead, beat them up and take them to the cemetery⁴¹). However, there is no second Holocaust because the Jews come to life again. One of the characters, Chuda, who keeps searching for her “non-existing Jewish roots”,⁴² even paints a vision of “Poland with Jews”.

Specters from the Holocaust haunt contemporary Polish literature and no exorcism can expel them. In fact, it seems that no exorcism is needed. We dream of a house that is not haunted, we long for a house where there are no ghosts. We would like to get rid of our demons, not fear our ghosts, which at any moment may come out of the nooks and corners of our past. However, we would also like to protect and shelter some specters. Because we know that their presence is now our only form of contact with the past, the only form of our post-memory of the Holocaust.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 234.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 230.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 243.