

The Holocaust and Public Memory in Poland

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At first glance, it may seem improbable or even offensive that the Holocaust is a controversial topic in many parts of Eastern Europe today. Some ["learn conversational Polish" blogs](#) advise language learners to avoid such conversations altogether. (One blogger wrote: "History. Avoid, avoid, avoid!")

In fairness, though, here in the United States we have our share of bitter, enduring controversies over museums, relics, and heritage sites. When the Smithsonian decided to put the Enola Gay on display, a debate erupted over the rights and wrongs of the decision to drop the atom bomb on Japan, and just how that story should be told to the public. Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's estate, is revered and visited by many, yet how should Monticello present the experience of Jefferson's slaves? What should Monticello say about his unacknowledged mistress, Sally Hemings?

Ask five different Americans about these issues and you are likely to get five different answers. Notice how much disagreement is possible, even though we have no "atom bomb deniers" or "slavery deniers." At the heart of this problem is the fact that the same history carries a different significance depending on who you are. No one is suggesting that we tear down the Southern plantation houses, but these complexities pose challenges for museums and historic sites. Managing them includes the stressful task of playing referee to all of these competing claims to the past.

Imagine a bus full of Polish tourists arriving at Monticello, or viewing the Enola Gay, or visiting South Carolina's state capital where the Confederate battle flag flew until quite recently. I would suggest that along with "facts about what happened," they need to hear some information about the controversy itself. After a certain point, it becomes an essential part of the story of the site, the relic, or the object. Knowing the history of commemoration also offers a way to

think about signage and interpretive plaques, monuments and memorials, and the decisions to preserve some things and let others crumble.

A town built on Jewish headstones

I originally composed this talk to deliver on the bus ride from Krakow to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The bus meanders through calm Polish countryside and peaceful small Polish towns before arriving at the fraught and forbidding Nazi concentration camp site. Yet when the British photographer Chris Schwarz travelled in southern Poland to document traces and survivals of the Jewish presence, he found many of them in just such small towns, not to mention “empty” fields and hilltops. In one village, he found an unfenced cemetery that no longer contained any headstones, but “in the minds of the local villagers it is still the Jewish cemetery and they let the site remain undisturbed.” Today, it appears simply as a dense grove of trees interrupting the cultivated fields all around it. [1]

If you like math puzzles, here’s one to think about: If there were 3.5 million Polish Jews in 1939, and we know that Jews had been in Poland since the Middle Ages, how many headstones did all those Jewish ancestors leave behind in graveyards? One clue is the sheer number of cemeteries. Before World War Two, there were 1,300 Jewish cemeteries in Poland alone. [2] Even assuming that some individuals weren’t well-off and left no grave marker behind, we must be talking about a very large number of stones.

Earlier this year, an Israeli newspaper reported on the town of Brest, in Poland’s neighboring country, Belarus. The article was entitled “A town built on Jewish headstones.” [3] Brest was nearly 70% Jewish around the year 1900. The Holocaust ended that tradition. In 1956, the Soviet authorities bulldozed the Jewish cemetery and built a soccer stadium on top of it, bones and all, but many headstones had already been looted by townspeople and reused as building materials.

New construction projects in Brest routinely uncover more stones. The journalist paints a picture for us: “A frozen, stony tendril pokes through the damp leaves... Sticking out of the dark earth in the overgrown yards... were dozens more gravestones that have yet to

be collected. There's no clear estimate of how many more lurk underground." Some recent efforts to salvage the headstones have resulted in a haphazard stack of homeless, mostly illegible fragments, themselves protected by "a crude enclosure made of gravestones stacked fourteen high."

Hearing this, it is understandable that we should ask why more hasn't been done. Indeed, local groups and nonprofits are working to find solutions in many Eastern European countries; see, for example, the [Matzeva Project](#) (for Poland) and [MACEVA](#) (for Lithuania). Some communities have mounted headstone fragments on special walls as a Holocaust memorial. [4] Yet this is not a wealthy part of the world, and one common local response is to retort that "with all their Western money" rich foreigners should pay for it. [5]



*Fragments of Jewish gravestones in Krakow's Jewish Quarter.
(Photo: Isaac Land)*

Imagine taking this issue to the Brest town council. Excavate, move, and restore thousands of heavy stones, at what cost? Presumably local politicians also have to think about putting a new roof on the

schoolhouse and fixing a broken sewer pipe. There is no strong local constituency to advocate on the headstone issue. Yet to make that objection sounds callous; the lack of Jewish voters in Brest is, itself, a result of the Holocaust.

If Jewish headstones are enough to provoke bitter debates over money, justice, and memory, what struggles can we expect around the site of the world's most notorious concentration camp?

Auschwitz-Birkenau under Communism

Poland would fall under Communist control in 1945; that ideology informed all decisions about the Nazi sites there for the next four decades. Stalin was no Holocaust denier, but his suspicion of Jewish (and Zionist) disloyalty led to the official line that the murdered were simply "victims of fascism" or (in the case of those who perished inside the USSR) "innocent Soviet citizens." Many Holocaust memorials still standing today date from this era, but references to the Jewish identity of the dead would be few and far between under Communism. The Auschwitz-Birkenau site became a Polish museum in 1947, as "a memorial to the martyrs of the Polish nation and other nations." [6]

David Shneer has argued that the process of de-Judaizing the Holocaust began as early as 1945, when Soviet photographers profiled the recently liberated death camps for mass-circulation magazines in the USSR. Highlighting Auschwitz rather than Birkenau, and turning the "Arbeit Macht Frei" gate into an icon, placed the emphasis on a camp that few Jews ever entered. [7] Polish authorities themselves tended to emphasize the camp where Poles had suffered; the much larger Birkenau site (more than 400 acres) received less attention and less protection. It is visibly less intact today. When James Young spent time there in the last years of Communism, he found couples strolling the meadows in search of picnic spots and young lads fishing in the ponds behind the crematoria. [8]

From 1960 onward, Auschwitz would also feature dedicated national pavilions. Israel did not get a pavilion, on the grounds that it had not existed during World War Two and therefore lost no citizens at the camp. A Jewish pavilion was permitted in 1968, with no mention of

the relative weight of Jewish deaths in comparison to others. Communist officials forbade Hebrew text as “the language of the Zionists”; interpretive materials would be in Polish and Yiddish only. [9] This Jewish pavilion was, in fact, closed for ten years and only allowed to re-open in 1978. [10]

The Catholic Church, itself persecuted under Communism, still exercised more influence due to its enduring popularity in Poland. The commemoration of Catholic martyrs at Auschwitz began in the Communist era and continues today. A proposal to open a convent inside the camp struck many Jews as an effort to Christianize the site. The fate of the Auschwitz convent was negotiated at Geneva in 1986, although a final resolution took six more years. [11]

One development that opened Auschwitz-Birkenau to outside input was its inclusion in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1979. This did not diminish the Polish government’s authority over the site, but it implied that Poland administered it on behalf of a global community. [12]

Auschwitz-Birkenau after Communism

After 1989, “millions rushed in eagerly to visit places that the Iron Curtain had made either off-limits or off the beaten track for many decades.” [13] Organized groups of Israeli high school students began to visit Poland on a regular basis in this period, as did American Jewish tourists seeking their roots. Ruth Ellen Gruber states that “perhaps 75 percent” of Jews in North America trace their descent to “historic Polish lands,” bearing in mind that Poland’s borders have changed quite a bit over time. [14] Auschwitz-Birkenau was a mandatory stop for many of these new visitors; by 1999, the site was getting 500,000 people a year, and by 2009, the annual figure exceeded one million. [15] The advent of mass tourism raised everyday problems for which there were no easy answers. Should there be an Auschwitz gift shop (and what would it sell)? Was it okay to sell pizza and ice cream? What about a dress code for visiting the camp?



Inside the Auschwitz visitor center. (Photo: Isaac Land)

At a more substantive level, the new visitors reopened questions that may have seemed settled to Poles. As Pam Jenoff put it: “To whom does the moral legacy of the Holocaust belong? Who were the victims? How should they be remembered? What role should the former camp sites play in that remembrance?” [16] Auschwitz had been developed primarily as a national shrine to Polish martyrs and patriots. Yet 90% of the deaths at the site as a whole were Jewish, and these took place primarily at Birkenau.

Was it time to radically redesign the whole visitor experience? One proposal argued for a visitor center in a new location, equidistant between Auschwitz and Birkenau so as to privilege neither, with shuttle buses running to both. Another proposal suggested that Auschwitz-Birkenau become extraterritorial to Poland, meaning that it would fall under the jurisdiction of some international body, or possibly be administered by Israel. [17]

Polish youth groups had erected crosses in a remote meadow at Birkenau. The new Jewish visitors brought this to the attention of the

Polish authorities. Despite the counter-objection that a Star of David had also been erected by the Polish youths, all of these objects were eventually removed on the grounds that under the agreement with UNESCO, religious icons counted as modifications or additions to the historic site. [18]

From 1990 onward, there would be an International Council for the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. Composed of twenty-four experts, “its advisory opinions are non-binding” but this establishes a way for the site’s diverse stakeholders to express their concerns to the Polish authorities. [19] This council also offers a way to give voice to groups who are never well-served by the concept of “national pavilions.” The Roma and Sinti lack a nation-state, and other categories of people, like homosexuals, were sent to the camp for reasons unrelated to their ethnic origin.

Balancing local priorities with the larger significance of the site remains a challenge. In 2001, a large plaque was erected in a prominent location at Birkenau to memorialize the Polish villages that were displaced to make room for the camp’s construction. Given that more than one million died here, what is the best way to commemorate the sacrifices of the villagers?



Birkenau, commemorative plaque. (Photo: Isaac Land)

One genocide among many?

Visitors to Vilnius, Lithuania may go to the Museum of Genocide Victims. This museum describes itself as devoted to “Historical-documentary material reflecting repression taken against the inhabitants of Lithuania by occupational regimes (1940-1990), material on the anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi resistance” as well as “information about participants of struggles for freedom.” Thus, the “genocide” refers to the violent suppression of Lithuanian national self-determination, particularly by the Soviet Union (as the 1990 ending date suggests). This is disconcerting, given that 90% of Lithuanian Jews died during the Holocaust (or as many as 95%, as a recent book estimates), many at the hands of Lithuanian collaborators. [20]

The deployment of the word “genocide” in this context, however, is not unique to Lithuania. In the English-speaking world, the effort to quantify and acknowledge the full scope of Eastern European suffering is most closely associated with Yale historian Timothy Snyder’s book *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010). [21] Snyder asks what the picture would look like if we consider just Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic Republics and if we expand the timeframe to include Stalin’s purges and starvation tactics (so: 1933-1945). The resulting total of deaths is 14 million non-combatants. His geographical scope includes the greater part of the 6 million from the Holocaust, but significantly most of Snyder’s 14 million did not die in concentration camps, and starvation was the most common cause of death.

Inside the Polish national pavilion at Auschwitz, the Holocaust is acknowledged, but so is the full sweep of Polish suffering under both Nazi and Soviet occupation. One display forcefully asserts a direct symmetry between Nazi atrocities and Soviet atrocities, arranging the hammer and sickle directly across from the swastika and devoting exactly equal space to Auschwitz and to the massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn forest. The framing text, by invoking the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 and the caption “Poland will never forget nor forgive,” identifies both Auschwitz and Katyn as part of a larger crime against Poland.



Auschwitz, inside the Polish national pavilion. (Photo: Isaac Land)

The issues raised by books such as *Bloodlands* pose interesting challenges for visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Why do we come? What is the difference between this place of death, and the deliberate mass starvation imposed in the Ukraine by Stalin, or even the systematic and murderous persecution of Polish or Lithuanian nationalists over a period of decades? Answers to these questions will vary. Most people who have visited the sorting platform and toured the remains of the gas chambers and crematoria leave with a sense that there was something uniquely horrible about this particular form of killing. The abuse of the language of public health to serve an exterminationist agenda, and the heavy involvement of medical personnel in the design and implementation of genocide do distinguish the Holocaust from other forms of mass murder and ethnic cleansing.

Gandhi's remark that "an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind" is well known. If that is true, what are we to make of this whole arena of conflict that Michael Rothberg has called "*competitive* memory"? Is it really necessary for rival groups to proceed as if "the remembrance

of one history erase[s] others from view” or compete for the same “real estate” that is somehow too small to accommodate more than one version of the past? [22] As Rothberg points out, these debates “are primarily struggles over *injustices of recognition*, over whose history and culture will be recognized.” [my italics] [23] This, in itself, suggests one form that a solution might take. Visiting one another’s museums and remembrance sites would be a start.

Is it a bad thing that we cannot agree about how to display, explain, and commemorate the past? Perhaps, as James Young has put it, “the best memorial to the fascist era and its victims... may not be a single memorial at all—but only the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end.” [24]

A final anecdote

I have presented the struggle over memory as a debate between people with imposing credentials (survivors, historians) or powerful organizations (national governments, museums, UNESCO). Yet those who study memory for a living are quick to point out that each of us create our own private version of the past, one person at a time. A Polish boy grew up in a small village in his parents’ house. His father had scavenged Jewish headstones and rather pointedly had used one for their house’s front doorstep. Each time a family member entered or left, they stepped on the headstone. What makes this story distinctive is that the boy always felt that this was wrong. When he grew up, he reached out to investigators of Poland’s Jewish past and took action to have the headstone removed to a more appropriate resting place. [25]

There is no single Polish version of the Polish past, any more than we are likely to find a single American version of the American past. What we can expect, as visitors to Poland, is a patchwork quilt or mosaic, formed by these micro-struggles and micro-decisions, one plaque, one site, and one headstone at a time. If we ask, “What is the Polish view of the Holocaust?” I would answer: We don’t yet know what shape that picture will take.

Notes

- [1] Jonathan Webber and Chris Schwarz, *Rediscovering Traces of Memory: The Jewish Heritage of Polish Galicia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 111.
- [2] "From the depths: Reclaiming Jewish heritage, one headstone at a time," *Jewish News*, December 14, 2014, <http://www.jewishnews.co.uk/depths-reclaiming-jewish-heritage-one-headstone-time/> accessed July 20, 2015.
- [3] Ilan Ben Zion, "In a town built on Jewish headstones, still no fixing what the Nazis destroyed," *Times of Israel*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/in-a-town-built-on-jewish-headstones-still-no-fixing-what-the-nazis-destroyed/> accessed July 20, 2015.
- [4] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 185-208.
- [5] Young, *Texture of Memory*, 207.
- [6] Pam R. Jenoff, "Managing Memory: The Legal Status of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Resolution of Conflicts in the Post-Communist Era," *The Polish Review* 46, no. 2 (2001), 131-153, quoted page 138.
- [7] David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 181.
- [8] Young, *Texture of Memory*, 142; for acreage of Birkenau site, Andrew Currey, "Can Auschwitz Be Saved?" *Smithsonian Magazine* February 2010, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?no-ist>, accessed July 20, 2015.
- [9] Young, *Texture of Memory*, 205.
- [10] Young, *Texture of Memory*, 130.
- [11] Jenoff, "Managing Memory," 143-144.
- [12] Jenoff, "Managing Memory," 141.
- [13] Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 143.
- [14] Gruber, *Virtually Jewish*, 149, 151.
- [15] Currey, "Can Auschwitz Be Saved?"
- [16] Jenoff, "Managing Memory," 146-7.
- [17] Robert Jan van Pelt, "Of Shells and Shadows: A Memoir on Auschwitz," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 13 (2003), 377-392, see page 387; Jenoff, "Managing Memory," 153.

- [18] Jenoff, "Managing Memory," 145; see also photograph of "crucified Star of David" at Birkenau in Young, *Texture of Memory*, 151.
- [19] Jenoff, "Managing Memory," 150.
- [20] Robert van Voren, *Undigested Past: The Holocaust in Lithuania* (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2011).
- [21] *Bloodlands* and its reception are discussed in Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past Is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 100-105.
- [22] Michael Rothberg, "Introduction," *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1-29, quoted page 2. I am indebted to Adam Wassel for sending me a PDF of this piece.
- [23] Rothberg, "Introduction," 20.
- [24] Young, *Texture of Memory*, 81.
- [25] Webber and Schwarz, *Rediscovering Traces*, 38.
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