

# Why “Re-Remembering?”

## Introduction

The title of this monograph, *Odpamiętywanie polsko-żydowskie* [‘Polish-Jewish Re-Remembering’], refers to the post-1989, thirty-year-long process of reviving attention to Polish-Jewish relations in historical, cultural, and literary studies, including the impact of Polish Jews on the development of Polish culture, their presence in Polish social life, and the relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish Poles. That process had been preceded by a long period of silence that fell on the centuries-old presence of Jews in the Polish Commonwealth after their extermination by the Nazis. Jewish studies in the years 1945–1989, concerning both the very presence of Jews and their annihilation in the Holocaust, were very limited: the Communist authorities were interested in neither. As a result, the majority of Poles mentally operate with the Jewish world from before the World War II and with the Shoah as mere artefacts of the cultural processes of post-memory.

This book consists of four sections. Section one, *Między Arią a Golusem. O literaturze polskiej, żydowskiej i polsko-żydowskiej* [‘Between Aria and Golus. On Polish, Jewish and Polish-Jewish Literature’], mainly deals with pre-1939 literature. It starts with an exploration of the volume of poetry *Stare kamienie* [‘Old Stones’], a joint work of two pre-war writers and their poetic outlook on the Polish-Jewish city of Lublin (*Magen Lublin* [מגן לובלין]. *Arnsztajnowa and Czechowicz*). Lyrical poetry devoted to Lublin is also the focus in the second chapter, an overview of older and contemporary authors with Lublin roots (*Cienie żydowskiego Lublina w poezji polskiej XX i XXI wieku* [‘The Shadows of the Jewish Lublin in the Polish Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century’]). The next one deals with a forgotten volume of prose devoted to the multicultural pre-WWII Polish army, written from the perspective of lyrical naturalism: *Żydzi polscy w armii II Rzeczypospolitej. „Profile i drobiazgi żołnierskie” Adolfa Rudnickiego* [‘Polish Jews in the Army of the Second Republic. Adolf Rudnicki’s *Profile i drobiazgi żołnierskie*’].

*Studium relacji chrześcijańsko-żydowskich. „Czarodziejka z Kastylii” Szaloma Asza* [‘Christian-Jewish Relationships: Shalom Ash’s *The Witch of Castile*’] directly relates to Jewish literature and the Yiddish language, trying to identify the causes of the perennial aversion between Jews and non-Jews: it does so by analyzing the short story

*The Witch of Castile*, based on historical events in medieval Rome. The mechanisms activated by the events being described shed light on the tensions that centuries later culminated in the Shoah.

The next chapter (*Języki Żydów polskich. Lingwistyczne dylematy poetów polsko-żydowskich* [‘The Languages of Polish Jewry. Polish-Jewish Poets’ Linguistic Dilemmas’]) deals with Polish-Jewish literature of the interwar period and the writers active in three languages: Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew. It was the first one that was frequently considered the language of the Jews: many writers chose themes, told stories of their native culture, and expressed their identity in Polish. This kind of literature mainly developed in the east-central part of the Second Polish Republic, with a Jewish population of over two million and the cultural centers of Lviv, Drohobych, Stanislaviv, and Lutsk. One can even say that in interwar poetry, this territory is portrayed as a mythological land, filled with Jewish spirituality, mainly thanks to the Hasidic movement and other Jewish activity in its towns and shtetls (*Mityczny fenomen Kresów w poezji polsko-żydowskiej* [‘The Mythical Eastern Borderlands in Polish-Jewish Poetry’]). The closing chapter of this first section of the book, *Poezja polsko-żydowska a dziecko* [‘Polish-Jewish Poetry in the Context of Child’], is concerned with the most important aspect of Jewish culture: children and the various models of their upbringing, from traditional, Judaic model, to Zionist models, focused on emigration to Palestine.

Section two, *Cztery strony czasu. Wędrowki pisarskie Arnolda Śluckiego* [‘Four Sides of Time. Literary Travels of Arnold Ślucki’], is devoted to this exceptional pre- and post-WWII writer, whose output had been discussed in a monograph and several articles, but whose highly metaphorical and symbolic language, full of metaphysical mysteries, allows for still novel interpretations. The first essay, *Polsko-żydowska Warszawa. Zapisy liryczne* [‘A Polish-Jewish Warsaw. Lyrical Writings’], deals with Ślucki’s first steps as a writer (in Yiddish), as well as with his fascination with Warsaw, the city with the biggest Jewish population in Poland and the center of the development of literature in Yiddish. Ślucki debuted as a poet in Polish in 1944. In the Stalinist period and later he made a few trips that were important for his work, including to the Soviet Union. He was interested in this country not for its politics but because it was a melting pot of cultures (*Dwa oblicza Rosji. Biografia i poezja* [‘Two Faces of Russia. Biography and Poetry’]). His trip to Israel, the ancient biblical land, full of signs of Revelation, gave him an opportunity to look for ways to unravel those mysteries „*Idole*” i „*Idol*”. *Interpretacje* [‘*Idols* and *Idol*. Interpretations’]. After the anti-Semitic events of March 1968, Ślucki was degraded (as a Polish officer), deprived of work, and forced to emigrate (as a Polish Jew). However, even in Israel, his poetic and critical writings in Polish did not subside. His book of verse *Biografia anioła* [‘Angel’s Biography’] was published posthumously in Warsaw in 1982. His journalistic writings were systematically published in the years 1969–1970 mainly in the Polish-Israeli daily *Nowiny-Kurier* – this is discussed in the chapter *Polski publicysta w Izraelu* [‘A Polish Columnist in Israel’].

The following section, titled *Dwie ziemie i dwa nieba. Poezja i judaizm* [‘Two Lands and Two Skies. Polish-Israeli Literary Images’], focuses on Polish writers in Israel, who can be divided into three groups, depending on the circumstances of their arrival in this country. One group are pre-WWII emigrants who came to Palestine following a Zionist ideology; another are Jewish soldiers in the Polish Army of General Anders (and the civilians that accompanied the army), who decided to stay in Israel and help build a Jewish state. The third group were survivors of the Shoah. Some of them arrived in Israel by sea shortly after the war, others came later (temporarily or permanently) in two successive Aliyahs: in the years 1956–1959 (when the First Secretary of the Communist Party in Poland was Władysław Gomułka) and in the March Exodus (1968–1970). They were either expelled or forced to leave by oppression and harassments.

All three groups have one thing in common: a nostalgia for Poland, their first homeland. Many expressed it by writing, more or less successful but always in Polish. By writing in their mother tongue, they symbolically traveled to the land of their childhood, the family home, and other places of importance. It is in Polish that they expressed the horror of what Holocaust did to the Jewish world: it turned it into a material and spiritual cemetery. It is also in Polish that they externalized their sorrow because of their exile. Poems with these motifs are discussed in the chapter *Polska i Polacy w poezji autorów piszących po polsku w Izraelu* [‘Poland and Poles in the Poetry of Israel-based Authors Writing in Polish’]. *Podwójny Mesjasz. „Piotrus” Leo Lipskiego* [‘The Double Messiah. Leo Lipski’s *Piotrus*’], is devoted to this distinguished writer, an ex-soldier of the Army of General Anders, living in Israel since 1942, or in fact to his amazing apocryphal micro-novel, very different from “the rest of Polish-Israeli literature, to the extent that it calls for a distinct language or a set of concepts to interpret”.<sup>5</sup> (Soon after his arrival in Israel, Lipski began to suffer from paralysis and eventually lost the ability to write.) The next chapter, in turn, *Poezja i judaizm. „Wiersze izraelskie” Anny Frajlich* [‘Poetry and Judaism. Anna Frajlich’s *Israeli Poems*’], looks at the poetic search of a cultural identity of this famous author from Szczecin during her stay in Israel. (Frajlich emigrated in one of the Aliyahs and eventually settled in the USA.)

This section of the volume concludes with a comprehensive survey *Krytyka literacka na łamach izraelskiego dziennika „Nowiny-Kurier” po roku 1968. Rekonesans* [‘Literary Criticism in the Israeli daily *Nowiny-Kurier* after 1968. A Reconnaissance’], devoted to four Polish-Jewish publicists (of the March’68 Aliyah): Henryk Dankowicz, Arnold Słucki, Filip Istner, and Natan Gross. Their texts raised fundamental questions for the development of literary criticism of the time.

---

<sup>5</sup> K. Famulska-Ciesielska, *Polacy, Żydzi, Izraelczycy. Tożsamość w literaturze polskiej w Izraelu*, Toruń 2008, p. 231.

The monograph concludes with the section *W tekstowym świecie Zagłady. O najnowszej literaturze polskiej* [‘In the Text World of the Shoah. On the Latest Polish Literature’]. A review of the main literary works in this area after 2000 is preceded by the opening essay *Zagłada i topika* [‘The Shoah and the Topoi’], focusing on the practice of describing, in innovative ways, the consequences of the Holocaust with the aid of ancient Judaic topoi. What mechanisms are involved? How can they be used to tell the unspeakable? In *Rekonstrukcje* [‘Reconstructions’] we are presented with a fusion of traditional topical resources (Judaic topoi) with modern ones (the topoi of the Shoah) in order to linguistically rebuild the microcosm of Polish Jews, annihilated during WWII. The protagonists are placed in a multilayered reality, both spatial and temporal, so that the literary world is reconstructed from the post-memory of the author and the cultural artefacts that derive from the topoi involved.

*Transfiguracje* [‘Transfigurations’] looks at the processes of transformation, transmutation, or transfiguration at the level of narration (contemporary cultural consequences of the Shoah, with or without attention to its real-life details) and plot (as when the literary world, along with its protagonists, is presented through a metamorphosis of reality from before or after the Shoah into a reality marred prophetically or implicationally by its presence). In transfiguration, through which the writer externalizes their indirect experience and the reader accepts it, “living through” history may take place at the emotional level, when that which is only known second-hand becomes “one’s own” in an other-than-rational sense. This kind of metamorphosis of the Shoah, its inscription into other spatial and temporal dimensions, reveals before the reader the relevant cultural mechanisms and the anthropological repercussions that can be recognized even now. All this becomes useful in that contemporary (and future?) generations can view the Holocaust from a perspective other than historical – indeed, it becomes useful in understanding many peculiarities of their own time. An additional value of this kind of “mediatized” image of the Shoah is the experience of the void left after the now non-existent Jewish world. The oppositions finished/continuing and changeable/permanent may bear a mark of a tragedy that has not yet been actualized, invoking anxiety in the reader.

The last chapter, titled *Subwersje* [‘Subversions’], argues for the need of applying, in talking about the Holocaust, the literary categories that derive from research on material culture. In the literary text under consideration, subversion is predominantly used to question the existing conventions and to deconstruct them so as to change the forms of memory transfer that are accepted and cherished in official, highly ritualized forms of communication. In this sense, subversion involves provocative artistic manoeuvres employed to create a deconventionalized represented world, while at the level of narration – to report on the Shoah in ways untypical of literature. These aesthetic-axiological tactics include transgression of taboos, critique of pathos and kitsch, or uncovering of stereotypes and pop-cultural clichés.

The writings analysed in this section of the book, when subjected to consistent description and mutual contextual references, appear as (mostly) successful representations of the Holocaust that make use of its conceptual repertoire. At the same time, the indirect memory of the Holocaust becomes, in these representations, a new paradigm. The authors of the second and third post-Shoah generation strive to make successive generations of readers realize that the bitter truth of the Shoah is an inalienable component of their own cultural identity and everyday life.

\*

In Marta Masada's pop-cultural, postmodern, and half-pornographic novel *Święto trąbek* ['Feast of the Trumpets'], one comes across this surprisingly accurate fragment: "Polish-Jewish relations are like the bipolar disorder, oscillating between depression and mania, love and hate, harvesting and sowing, displacement and exportation".<sup>6</sup> This state of affairs has remained unaffected by the common centuries-old Polish-Jewish history, by the assimilation and acculturation of Polish Jews, or the most tragic event of the 20th century: the Shoah. Nor has it changed under the influence of post-war emigration of Jews from Poland or the revival of Polish-Israeli relationships after 1989. Maybe we now have this one last chance: the process of a common Polish-Jewish re-remembering?

---

<sup>6</sup> M. Masada, *Święto trąbek*, Warszawa 2016, p. 409.