

Chapter I

Collective forgetting of the Holocaust in the People's Republic of Poland

1. Collective memory and collective forgetting

Collective memory has been explored by different social sciences and defined in many ways. Moreover, there are also other names to describe and analyse this phenomenon, such as: “social memory”, “historical memory”, “historical consciousness” or “cultural memory”. Since collective memory is studied by researchers representing various fields of science (even if they sometimes touch upon the same issues and problems), different meanings are attached to it. Therefore, the literature about collective memory is characterised by “conceptual and terminological confusion”.⁷ From the perspective of this book, two definitions, which are general and mutually corresponding, seem sufficient. The first was offered by Barbara Szacka, according to whom, collective memory refers to “a set of beliefs” of a given community “about its past, about people and events that inhabited it” and a way of “commemorating the past and spread the knowledge about it” – this knowledge is considered as “obligatory equipment of each member of this community.”⁸ The other definition was coined by Marek Ziółkowski, who stated that collective memory is “a set (or arrangement) of beliefs about the past; beliefs that belong to social consciousness, in which one's own individual memories mix with messages received from other people. To a smaller or larger extent, this set of beliefs meets the three main criteria of social consciousness.”⁹

In conclusion, collective memory is a projection of the past shared by a community that is aware of its own continuance; it is based on a set of beliefs and ideas that refer to the past. These beliefs and ideas usually concern past events, but also persons who are engraved in the memory of a community and are commemorated by it. They do not need to correlate with facts and the historical truth. As

7 B. Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Warszawa 2006, p. 33.

8 B. Szacka, *Historia i pamięć zbiorowa*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2003, no 4, p. 4.

9 M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting after Communism. The Polish Case*. “Polish Sociological Review”, 2002, no1, pp. 7-24

Bronisław Baczko noted, images of past events and persons are valued by collective memory more than historical knowledge reproduced and provided by historians.¹⁰ Therefore, historical findings and common beliefs do not have to overlap; collective memory can actually refer to a national imagination consisting of myths and legends. It is only important that the images shared by a community refer to the past of that community and co-create a complex system of signs and symbols that is comprehensible only for the community members.

One should also take into consideration that “collective memory” serves as a metaphor which represents common content rooted in the minds of many people at the same time. However, it is always an individual who remembers, not a community. A member of a social group is also a depository of the collective memory that is cultivated and transferred within this group. Therefore, collective memory consists of beliefs about the past events to which an individual refers as a member of a given social group.¹¹

For some social groups, collective memory is a defining element. For instance, nations, religious groups, and ethnic and local communities cannot do without it if they want to maintain and strengthen their identity.¹² A nation is a remarkable example of a community that is difficult to imagine without referring to a collective memory of the past.¹³ Not only is collective memory a necessary ingredient of individual identity, but also the collective identity of each nation. As Paul Ricoeur notes, it “assures the temporal continuity of the person” and, by this he means that it assures the identity of this person.¹⁴ A response to the question “Who am I?”/“Who are we?” should be preceded with an answer to another question: “Who was I?”/“who were we?” Without memory, individuals and nations would be automatically deprived of their identity; moreover, their present would become difficult to comprehend and interpret. A nation needs to be aware that its present derives from the past and that the past consequently drives a nation into the future. Thus, it is necessary to maintain continuity with

10 See: B. Baczko, *Wyobrażenia społeczne. Szkice o nadziei i pamięci zbiorowej*, Warszawa 1994, p. 14 -15, 40.

11 See: A. Szpociński, *Kanon historyczny. Pamięć zbiorowa a pamięć indywidualna*, “Studia Socjologiczne” 1983, no 4, p. 129-131.

12 Ibidem, p. 130.

13 See: G. Pyszczek, *Pamięć narodowa jako problem filozoficzny*, “Przegląd Filozoficzny” 2004, no 1, p. 241-255; B. Szacka, *Pamięć społeczna a identyfikacja narodowa*, [in:] *Trudne sąsiedztwa. Z socjologii konfliktów narodowościowych*, A. Jasińska-Kania (Ed.), Warszawa 2001, p. 37-45; J. Kiliński, *Wspólnota abstrakcyjna. Zarys socjologii narodu*, Warszawa 2004; B. Anderson, *Wspólnoty wyobrażone*, Kraków 1997.

14 P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 96

the past to develop national identity. The further the collective memory goes back into the past, the stronger the national identity is rooted.¹⁵

Needless to say, each nation refers to their past or searches for their roots with their own varying intensity, as Barbara Szacka noted.¹⁶ For Poles, memory of the past is very significant. They are classified by researchers as a nation which is “historically sensitive about the past and interested in it”.¹⁷

The process of the development of collective memory cannot be reduced to a simple aggregation of individual memories. There are many factors involved in this process. The remembered past is an area of a permanent conflict between different images of the past inscribed in the memory of individuals and social groups. Thus, the development of collective memory can be viewed as a game that is permanently played between different subjects representing different memories. For this reason, Bourdieu’s concept of a field seems to be a very useful theoretical tool to study this phenomenon. Anna Sawisz used Bourdieu’s theory to analyse the social memory of the past.¹⁸ According to this theory, social memory of the past is a field, in which the “stake of the game” is collective identity.¹⁹

This game is played by historians, people who popularise history, various social groups, interest groups, political parties, the Catholic Church and other institutionalised and informal participants in public life.²⁰ Particular attention should be paid to the state authority, represented mainly by the educational system and its communication tools. In the field of social memory, there are also individuals whose memory stems from their own experience and the stories about the past that they were told by their relatives. Family knowledge of the past, however, is limited to three generations.²¹

15 See: M. Król, *Miedzy przeszłością a przyszłością. O pamięci, zapominaniu i przewidywaniu*, Poznań 2004.

16 See: B. Szacka, *Dzieci – Szkoła – Społeczna pamięć przeszłości*, “Kultura i społeczeństwo” 1998, no 4, p.165.

17 E. Tarkowska, *Polacy wobec przyszłości i przeszłości. Czas społeczny w okresie realnego socjalizmu i w okresie transformacji*, [in:] *Idee a urządzenie świata społecznego. Księga jubileuszowa dla Jerzego Szackiego*, E. Nowicka, M. Chałubiński (Eds.), Warszawa 1999, p. 403.

18 See: P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 226-257; P. Bourdieu, L. J. D. Vacquant, *Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 94-115.

19 See: A. Sawisz, *Transmisja pamięci przeszłości*, [in:] *Czas przeszły i pamięć społeczna*, A. Sawisz, B. Szacka, Warszawa 1990, p. 121-137; These considerations are based on the research concept proposed by Anna Sawisz.

20 M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting after Communism...*, p.7

21 See: N. Jakowenko, *O pamięci i tradycji historycznej*, “Przegląd Polityczny” 2003, no 59, p. 96.

Certainly, the list of agents who subscribe to the game of memory is incomplete, and the social position of the agents is never identical. However, such a list can be analysed in relation to the political regime of a country and the degree of permission given to the coexistence of competitive memories of the past. Totalitarian, authoritarian and liberal-democratic systems will each have a different impact on it.

The essence of the first two systems is the elimination of any memory that differs from the official version and thus prevents other “agents of memory” from speaking. Totalitarian regimes strictly regulate and standardise the field of social memory. Although the function of every political power is to rule over the past, only totalitarian power exercises absolute control over it and makes it a key government tool in addition to deciding what to remember and how and what should be unquestionably forgotten. According to Hannah Arendt, making people, things or subjects disappear from public memory, creating “holes of oblivion”, is an immanent feature of totalitarianism.²² Thus, as Milan Kundera aptly noted with the words of a character from one of his books: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”²³.

There are also struggles over memory in liberal democracies, although they are less intensive. They may become exacerbated whenever the state authority aspires to appropriate the past and dictate a binding interpretation of past events and when the social past and the official past no longer correspond with each other.

Official memory includes the public and formal interpretations of the past that are controlled by the state authority. The authorities use various methods to spread this version and, at the same time, to control it. Official memory manifests itself in national celebrations, iconography, publications, and memorials and it is transferred through the media and the educational system. Official memory always occupies a privileged position in the field of social memory and in public discourse, regardless of the character of the political regime. This is because every power has a stake in controlling what is remembered and how it is commemorated. As Michael Foucault noted, “if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism”.²⁴

By contrast, common memory consists of social beliefs and images about the past, which are shared regardless of whether they were granted official per-

22 See: H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*,

23 M. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, p. 4

24 M. Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, Semiotexte(e), New York 1996, p. 124.

mission.²⁵ It is an amalgam of individual memories, messages conveyed by family and social environment, a result of education and the acknowledged and internalised version of history. Official and common memory can sometimes overlap and complement each other but also can be mutually exclusive. Differences between common and official memory represent the distance between the authorities and the general populace.

In liberal democracy, the field of social memory includes various memories represented by individuals, informal groups and institutions. They coexist and become articulated within the social sphere. These memories do not always correspond and the differences between them can sometimes result in serious tensions and social conflicts. The opportunity to manifest them freely, however, undermines and disintegrates the status of each memory that aspires to appropriate the interpretation of the past. Therefore, a system of mutual control emerges and the image of the past becomes complemented with recollections embedded in individual memories.²⁶

The coexistence of various private memories in the public sphere in a pluralistic social system is related to a phenomenon labelled by Pierre Nora as the “democratisation of history”. The memory of the past is no longer possessed by historians, or other people, or institutions formally responsible for its storage, reconstruction and interpretation. It becomes the property of liberated and emancipated nations, of national, ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, and individuals. Various equal memories, hitherto confiscated and/or absent from public life, now make their voice heard. For the aforementioned minorities, regaining their own past creates conditions for full affirmation or redefinition of their identity.²⁷

The development of a national, collective past in a pluralistic system is thus a specific negotiation process between various actors equipped with their own image of the remembered past. According to Barbara Szacka, their main channel of communication and the field in which they coexist and struggle is the “disseminated memory”.²⁸ It is co-created by diverse journalistic, fictional, popular

25 See: E. Dmitrów, *Pamięć i zapomnienie w stosunkach polsko-niemieckich*, “Przegląd Zachodni” 2000, no 1, p. 2.

26 See: M. Beylin, *Spory pamięci. Analiza debaty prasowej* [in:] *Rytualny chaos. Studium dyskursu publicznego*, M. Czyżewski, S. Kowalski, A. Piotrowski (Eds.), Kraków 1997, p. 227-229.

27 See: P. Nora, *Czas pamięci*, “Res Publica Nowa” 2001, no 7, p. 40-41.

28 See: B. Szacka, *Transformacja społeczna a świadomość historyczna*, typescript, 1996, p. 3, citation after: A. Paczkowski, *Od sfalszowanego zwycięstwa do prawdziwej klęski*, Kraków 1999, p. 208-209; Geoffrey Hartman proposed another term, which is “public memory”, embracing the multitude of messages about the past, publicised by the state

science or course book texts about the past. Interpretations of the past are also given via TV and radio educational programmes, documentaries and movies, street names, symbolic policy, anniversaries, commemorations and national holidays²⁹ and are developed by journalists, historians, teachers, and other public actors. Although the “disseminated memory” still occupies a privileged position, it always runs into common memory based on individual knowledge and experience. Researchers who analyse collective memory identify two main forms of the relationship between common and disseminated memory.

According to Barbara Szacka, “disseminated memory” reaches the general populace and is submitted to the processes of selection and falsification or confirmation. It is confronted with the current resource of factual knowledge, beliefs and evaluative judgments about the past. Both knowledge and judgment result from personal experience and from family and generational transmission. Only when filtered through these media is “disseminated memory” able to penetrate “common memory”, which is never a simple reflection and accumulation of messages from the “educational and persuasive area”.³⁰

According to Jerzy Jedlicki, however, disseminated memory consists of numerous and often mutually contradictory stories of the past. These stories serve as templates for “thousands of individual biographies, deprived of what is irregular, unusual, inconsistent or ambiguous”.³¹ In other words, individual memories are honed so they can be assimilated into the collectively negotiated and created memory of the past. Collective memory thus seems to be a metaphorical name for the accepted image of the past of the “disseminated memory”. This is the image in which individual memories find their roots and from which they learn about the past that is already unavailable for them. As Waldemar Kuligowski notes, selectivity of human memory is sometimes supplemented with the content of the “objectifying collective discourse”.³²

The theories presented above seem to complement rather than exclude each other as they both refer to two elementary human needs: confirmation of identity and belonging to a community. People need to define themselves as individuals with unique biographies but also as members of some community. As a result, their own past memories are supplemented, confirmed and strengthened in the

and the media. According to Hartman, public memory is jittery, mobile and perpetually changing; See: G. H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Indiana University Press 1996, p. 107.

29 B. Szacka, *Transformacja...*, p. 208-209.

30 B. Szacka, *Transformacja...*, p. 209.

31 See: J. Jedlicki, *O pamięci zbiorowej*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 26-27 VII 1997, p. 14.

32 W. Kuligowski, *O historii, literaturze i terażniejszości oraz innych formach zapominania*, “Konteksty” 2003, no 3-4, p. 83.

memories of people who surround them. If the need to belong is stronger than the desire for individuality and uniqueness or if our own memories fail – David Lowenthal notes – “we adjust personal elements to the collectively remembered past and we gradually stop recognizing which is which”.³³

It is worth noticing that collective memory is always influenced by the present. It is the present that decides what should be remembered at a given moment and how it should be remembered, but also which past events or people should be forgotten: it defines their position in the collective memory and determines historical interpretations. Researchers who study the determinants of attitudes to the past agree that the present is the determining factor, while our reception and perception of the past are always subjected to current problems,³⁴ as well as our interest in the past, its recollections and actualisations.

It is also usually true that traumatised nations and societies have a particular tendency to look towards the past to find comfort or confirmation of their identity.³⁵ Moreover, collective memory, like individual memory, is adjustable and can be adapted to what is currently believed to be just and glorious, and what is to be condemned. It evolves with the changing criteria of social judgements, to which it adjusts the stored images of the past.

Without doubt, however, there are specific events and people from the past that will always generate memories, although there is no certainty when and how they will be remembered and interpreted, what meaning they will convey, who will claim them and which goals they will serve. One should thus agree with Jan Assman, according to whom “cultural memory has its fixed point, its horizon does not change with the passing of time (...) we call these [points] ‘figures of memory’ (...) it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation (...) sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation.”³⁶ Memory is flexible and the present influences “figures of memory”. This is proved by debates about past events held in different parts of the world and concern changes in current “figures of memory.”³⁷ Redefined, they are no longer valid or lose their exclusive access code to the past.

It would be a truism to say that no complete set of past events and persons are stored in the collective memory of a nation and not everything that took place a long time ago is automatically classified as a “historical can-

33 D. Lowenthal, *Przeszość to obcy kraj*, “Res Publica Nowa”, 2001, no 7, p. 9-10.

34 See: M. Ziółkowski, *Cztery funkcje...*, p. 56.

35 See: E. Tarkowska, op. cit., 403.

36 See: J. Assmann and John Czaplicka, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, New German Critique, No. 65, 1995, p129-130.

37 Ibidem, p. 11-16.

on".³⁸ These events and characters go through the evaluation process and only a select few play a significant role in the collective memory of a nation, as a reference point for current actions. Therefore, collective memory has little in common with the notion of tradition in the subjective sense, as proposed by Jerzy Szacki, which covers only the part of heritage that the consecutive generations agree to maintain and keep alive.³⁹ What matters is not the objective legacy but the way the elements from the past are evaluated. From this perspective, tradition is incorporated into the present and "represents a particular type of value which needs to be referred to the past to be defended (or criticised)" and these values must be shared and accepted by a community.⁴⁰

Referring to Marek Ziółkowski, one could say that collective forgetting is a reversal of the phenomenon of collective memory. Collective forgetting means that even if certain beliefs concerning the past cross someone's mind, they are transformed, reduced, reinterpreted and pushed to the subconscious; they cease to be the subject of public discussion, and do not give rise to any group or individual activities of a practical nature.⁴¹

Needless to say, aspects of our past that are submitted to the process of forgetting are diverse and such is the influence of forgetting on our identity. From the perspective of this book, however, one particular variant of forgetting is significant. First of all, it concerns the community; second of all, it refers to past events that fall into oblivion for a particular reason⁴²: usually those that bring shame and discomfort to the community, and/or do not match the acknowledged and cultivated model of collective identity. As with individual forgetting, collective oblivion also applies to the rule expressed by Maurice Halbwachs that one remembers what is comfortable to remember and forgets what is comfortable to forget.⁴³

38 See: A. Szpociński, *Kanon historyczny. Pamięć zbiorowa a pamięć indywidualna*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 1983, no 4, p. 134-136.

39 J. Szacki, *Tradycja. Przegląd problematyki*, Warszawa 1971, p. 150.

40 Ibidem, p.155.

41 See: M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting after Communism. The Polish Case*. Polish Sociological Review, 2002, no1, pp. 7-24

42 As Maria Hirszowicz and Elżbieta Neyman note, "similar to ignorance, which we relativise to knowledge, oblivion may be described only as socially important gaps in collective memory. Thus, if we define memory as accumulation and recording information and its interpretation structures rooted in the mind, oblivion is everything beyond this zone – both unabsorbed information and the information which was eliminated or forgotten". See: M. Hirszowicz, E. Neyman, *Spoleczne ramy niepamięci*, "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 2001, no 3-4, p. 24.

43 M. Halbwachs, *Spoleczne ramy pamięci*, Warszawa 1969, p. 368.

In this context, collective forgetting does not result from the natural limitations of human memory, which is sometimes fragmentary, selective and burdened with information coming from everywhere. This approach is not intended to be a positive answer to Friedrich Nietzsche's appeal that warned against "the excess of history" which "has attacked life's plastic powers" and propagated the necessity or even apotheosis of oblivion and "enclosing oneself within a bounded *horizon*."⁴⁴ Also, oblivion is not perceived the way Jürgen Habermas defined it, who stated that exact memory of events crucial for the collective past is related to the means of actively forgetting the past and letting it go.⁴⁵

Collective forgetting refers to something completely different. It exposes the more or less conscious disposition of community members to omit some aspects of the past and leave them beyond the margins of collective memory. They are aspects that bring shame and mental discomfort and sometimes burden the community with responsibility and sometimes, in addition to the symbolic apology, require practical action such as reparations or restitution. They do not match the cultivated narratives about their bravery, glory and suffering, but constitute a completely new story. If this story were acknowledged, it would present a diverse and complex image of the past. It would also require necessary corrections to the collective memory, which would enrich it and introduce balance between glory and disgrace. As a result, a complete reconstruction of collective identity would be possible.

Needless to say, collective forgetting manifests itself in diverse forms and on different levels. According to Paul Ricoeur, it may be as passive as it is active. It is "a strategy of avoidance, of evasion, of flight", "motivated by a will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen's environment, in short by a wanting-not-to-know". These two levels of collective forgetting can overlap and complement each other but can also be mutually exclusive. Spontaneous, social processes of forgetting sometimes cover the state policy of forgetting about some elements of the uncomfortable past. In this case, institutionalised oblivion, or, as Shari J. Cohen labelled it, "state-organized forgetting of history"⁴⁶, corresponds with spontaneous forgetting and even overlaps it. This often happens in the name of an unspoken national agreement not to deal with difficult subjects and antagonise society. Forgetting helps to legitimise power, to keep a collective good mood and, in particular, to defend the collective identity that

44 See: F. Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 120

45 See: J. Habermas, *O publicznym użytkowaniu historii*, [in:] *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, M. Łukasiewicz (Ed.), Londyn 1990, p. 67.

46 Citation after: M. Shafir, *Between Denial and "Comparative Trivialization"*, "Acta. Analysis of Current Trends in Anti-Semitism", 2002, no. 19, p. 4.

could be disturbed by certain past events. “An all-national community of forgetting and selective remembering, which serves collective, all-national interests” agrees on one thing: not to talk about the difficult past and not to recall it.⁴⁷

Sometimes, however, forgetting is only an order of the authorities, reflected in silence, lies and repressive censorship, which are characteristics of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Such an institutionalised order does not correspond with the common memory of the past, but mutilates, suppresses and represses it.

As has been already mentioned, management of the past is conducted by every authority, including democratic ones. Institutionalised memory and forgetting, as David Middleton and Derek Edwards noted, is demonstrating that collective memory is essential for the identity and cohesion of a community. “It is not just that ‘he who controls the past, controls the future’ but also ‘he who controls the past controls who we are’.”⁴⁸ The difference is that liberal democracies involve numerous participants in the game of social memory and the position of the state authority, however privileged it may be, is not omnipotent. “Official memory” also occupies a privileged position, for instance in the case of historical policy.

Collective forgetting of some elements of the past is sometimes increased by various means and methods. Past events are sometimes simply passed over in silence, sometimes reinterpreted or falsified; biographies of heroes are presented selectively and the blame for reprehensible acts or omissions is attached to enemies or circumstances. All these actions are intended to unburden memory, ease conscience and safely forget. The process of collective forgetting has a lot in common with the regression of uncomfortable information from individual consciousness. However, these endeavours do not end in complete success. Traumatic events, repressed and stored in the unconscious, cause neuroses and block the processes of remembering and mourning. “Silencing” the dark side of a past not yet dealt with, as Gesine Schwann notes, not only poisons individual minds, but also paralyses social life and hinders the development of democratic attitudes.⁴⁹

Marek Ziółkowski labelled difficult and problematic aspects of the Polish past related to historical taboos as “skeletons in the nation's history closet”. This metaphor stands for events and elements of the past that are submitted to “more or less deliberate and functional selective remembering and forgetting”.⁵⁰ There

47 See: M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting ...*, p. 14.

48 D. Edwards, D. Middleton, *Collective Remembering*, Routledge, London 1990, p. 10.

49 Citation after A. Krzemiński, *Okaleczeni milczeniem*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 28 VII 2001, p. 18.

50 M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting ...*, p. 9.

are “two distinct layers of memory and oblivion, and, consequently, two main types of ‘skeletons’. One is linked with the pre-communist past (up to 1945), while the other is connected with the communist past (1945-1989)”. The difference between them is significant.

The former are “mostly ‘all-national’” and “kept in the closet” in the name of the national interest “because they can be detrimental to the perception and self-perception of the national group as a whole”, while the latter “are hidden in the closet not by the national group as a whole, but rather by some particular groups or individuals”.⁵¹ However, the processes of the collective forgetting of the elements of the national past from before 1945 were intensified in the communist period. In other words, “skeletons” from the pre-communist period were then banished.

There are several issues related to the past that were falsified, reinterpreted and repressed after 1945, both by official and common memory. First of all, collective forgetting was evident with regard to the culture, tradition and achievements of ethnic groups that had lived on Polish territory before the war. Secondly, “Poles concentrated on their own fate tended and still tend to disregard or belittle pains, tragedies and losses of other ethnic groups”. Thirdly, it was also forgotten that “although Poles were mainly victims they sometimes also victimised others”. Fourthly, “Poles tend to forget or minimise the fact that they on many occasions also unjustly benefited from all those historical processes, that they were beneficiaries of some acts of injustice.”⁵²

All these aspects of the past constitute the realm of historical taboo. This specific social phenomenon is particularly true in the case of the Holocaust, which was organised and led by Nazi Germany. The subject of the Holocaust may be even considered as a paradigmatic manifestation of the process of collective forgetting in Poland, during which official memory corresponded with a spontaneous need to forget among the masses. Between 1945 and 1989 the aforementioned “all-national community of forgetting and selective remembering” developed. It was only at the beginning of the 1980s, when the first signals of breaking the national conspiracy of silence appeared, that the national conspiracy of silence would break. Before presenting a fragmentary analysis of the collective forgetting of the Holocaust, however, it is important to provide the context.

Under the policy of Nazi Germany, Poland became the main arena for the extermination of Polish Jews and other Jews deported from Nazi-occupied Europe. It was in the Polish territory where Nazis built concentration camps, in

51 See: M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting...*, 14-15.

52 Ibidem, p. 12-14.

which exclusively or primarily Jews died. Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Chelmno-on-Ner, Sobibor, Belzec, Majdanek, Gross-Rosen, Stuthoff: these were the “factories of death” installed in Poland by the Nazis.⁵³ It was also there that the last stage of the murderous plan of the “Final Solution” was carried out. However, the process of the extermination of the Jews who had lived on Polish territory before the World War II was not limited to these camps, where the only participants and witnesses were the murderers, victims and people who lived in close proximity. The Holocaust was stretched in time, consisted of particular stages, was committed with different methods and, most importantly, in numerous places in Poland and before the eyes of Polish citizens. It was the omnipresence of the Holocaust that placed the war fate of Polish Jews in the very “centre of the occupational experience of Polish citizens in every town and village.”⁵⁴

Even if “every town” was some generalisation, it is definitely true that the Holocaust occurred before Poles’ eyes in different places in Poland and that Poles observed its each particular stage. They knew Nazi orders about the Jews, they met people marked by the stigmatising “Star of David”, they saw Jews deported, they observed the walls of the ghettos and how these ghettos were then liquidated. They saw Jews gathering in central points of cities, villages and towns, in squares and markets, sometimes right before execution in nearby forests or deportation to an extermination camp.

Some of them saw Jews killed one by one, executed collectively, or transported in cattle cars. There were those who saw smoke rising from crematoria and learnt what the smell of burnt flesh was. And the rest could at least hear about it. Finally, at the end of the war, Poles must have noted that shtetl residents vanished into thin air; that none of their former Jewish neighbours were around and that the number of Polish Jews had declined. In 1939, the number of Jews in Poland was nearly 3.5 million people, and between 1939 and 1945 nearly 3 million were murdered.⁵⁵ About 50-60,000 Jews are estimated to have survived the war in Poland: on the Aryan side, in forest hideouts, or in partisan camps.⁵⁶

53 These places were acknowledged as extermination camps the Act of 7 May 1999 *on the protection of former Nazi extermination camps* Journal of Laws of 1999, No. 41, item 412 as amended)

54 J. T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada. Trze eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i komunistów 1939-1948*, Kraków 2001, p. 58-59.

55 See: F. Tych (Ed.), *Pamięć. Historia Żydów Polskich przed, w czasie, i po Zagładzie*, Warszawa 2004, p. 66-67, 157.

56 This number does not include repatriates from the Soviet Union. Ibidem, p. 175-180; See: B. Szaynok, *Ocaleni z Holokaustu w Polsce 1944-1950*, [in:] *Holokaust. Lekcja*

However, a combination of various circumstances and psychological mechanisms made the unprecedented event of the Holocaust and the memory of the murdered Jews and Jews in general be submitted to the process of collective forgetting. Jews were not mourned in Poland; it would be hard to find any evidence of collective grief. Contrarily, there are testimonies that demonstrate that Jews returning home were welcomed with astonishment and confusion rather than sympathy. Poles wanted to forget about the Holocaust and its victims for many reasons and that is what happened. Referring to Eva Hoffman, who stated that “In the memory of the Holocaust, Poland occupies a special place”, one may say that in Poland, memories of the Holocaust have not occupied any special place for decades, although since 1980s, the situation has been improving.⁵⁷

Without doubt, the thesis about collective forgetting about the Holocaust requires evidence and explanation. It demands an answer to the question: what exactly was forgotten and how? What were the main reasons for the need to collectively forget? What were the circumstances and manifestations of this process? Before answering these questions, however, it is necessary to provide some important comments and reservations that explain the structure of the following considerations.

Some researchers claim that forgetting the Holocaust and, in general, exploitation of the problem of Polish-Jewish relations, both of which resulted in serious modifications to the Polish collective memory, are primarily the effect of the policy of the communist Polish state. The historical policy during communism was based on concealment and manipulation of history and memory, and on censorship preventing public debate and limiting the freedom of research and publications. In other words, forgetting the Holocaust was a result of what had been inscribed into the framework of the official memory of the past and what had been eliminated from it through silence and transformation. What is more, the restricting censorship simply blocked any debate attempts. Therefore, from this perspective, the authorities and the system are to blame.

Denying these words would be a serious mistake. The state policy of the People's Republic of Poland (Polish: *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, PRL) concerning the Holocaust and Jews in general largely contributed to the process of collective forgetting. Forgetting the Holocaust was thus a state-organised element of the official historical policy on the war memory. To claim, however, that the process of forgetting resulted only from the state policy and the nature

historii. Zagłada Żydów w edukacji szkolnej, J. Chrobaczyński, P. Trojański (Eds.), Kraków 2004, p. 47-62.

57 See: E. Hoffman, *Sztetl*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 6 II 1998, p. 10.

of the system, would be a simplification and a limitation of the cognitive perspective. Official memory of the Holocaust in Poland responded to the need of the common memory to repress the difficult past. In other words, state and society met the halfway and the “active forgetting” defined by Paul Ricoeur corresponded with the processes of “passive forgetting”.⁵⁸

The historian Paweł Macewicz drew attention to this phenomenon, stating that PRL constituted two types of taboo on the Holocaust: political and social. The former was reinforced by communist authorities, who, aware of their weak social support, avoided the sensitive subject of the Holocaust and Jews. Therefore, the question of Jewish martyrdom and, in particular, the problematic topic of the Polish attitude towards the Holocaust and pre-war Polish-Jewish relations were not exposed. If these subjects appeared at all, they only did to some limited extent and were treated in an instrumental way.

The social taboo, labelled as a national taboo by Włodzimierz Borodziej, concerned particular aspects of the Holocaust that the authorities were determined to conceal. They included the complicated Polish-Jewish past before the war and, in particular, Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust which were “considered shameful, ambiguous and confusing – even subconsciously.”⁵⁹ That is how a certain informal, national “community of selective remembering and forgetting” spontaneously emerged. This community, as Lech Nijakowski noted, protected the taboo on the Holocaust “by police batons on the one hand and social anathema on the other.”⁶⁰

As we see, the PRL authorities created conditions for forgetting the Holocaust. The official memory of the war reinforced the common processes of forgetting through silence, falsifications, half-truths and modifications of history. To prove this social phenomenon and demonstrate that the state-organised forgetting about the Holocaust corresponded with the social need for oblivion, it is important to determine the reasons for this need and only then present the process of forgetting.

58 See: P. Ricoeur, *Pamięć, zapomnienie, historia*, [in:] *Tożsamość w czasach zmiany*, K. Michalski (Ed.), Kraków 1995, p. 38-39.

59 See: *Pamięć jako pole bitwy*, (editorial discussion of Paweł Machcewicz, Feliks Tych, Włodzimierz Borodziej, Grzegorz Motyka) “Przeгляд Polityczny” 2001, no 52/53, p. 11-12.

60 See: Lech M. Nijakowski, *Baron Munchhausen czyli o polskiej polityce pamięci*, “Przeгляд Polityczny” 2006, no 75, p. 56.

2. Genealogy of the need to forget

In his memories, Kazimierz Brandys noted that “after seven hundred years of sharing the common ground, Poles did not shed a tear at the Jews turned into ashes.”⁶¹ Why was it so? Why did the “common disease of silence” about the Jews and the Holocaust spread across Poland for entire decades?⁶² Why did people want to forget?

One of the often-recognised reasons for this amnesia and for indifferent attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust during the war was the cultural, lifestyle and religious differences between Poles and Jews before the war. The distance between the two nations resulted in their separation and mutual lack of understanding in defining the gap between the two communities. The circumstances and reasons for this distance are not crucial and there is no point in searching for those who were responsible for it. It is important, however, to note the fact that before the war, Poles and Jews lived next to each other rather than together.⁶³

The pre-war anti-Semitism extended the distance between Poles and Jews. It was obviously manifested in various forms and had its various advocates. Anti-Semitism was included into the programmes of some political parties of national-Catholic origin but it was also used by high and low ranked Church officials.⁶⁴ Anti-Semitic discourse was present in the nationalist and Catholic press (“Mały Dziennik”, “Rycerz Niepokalanej”). What is more, in the 1930s, anti-Semitism manifested itself in openly racist and discriminatory acts at universities. Jewish students were separated from the rest of students (*ghetto benches*); the number of Jewish students was limited (*numerus clausus*) or Jews were not granted the right to study at all (*numerus nullus*).⁶⁵ The rules of *numerus clausus* and *numerus nullus* applied also to the limited or denied access to Jews to some professions. In addition, in the years preceding World War II, violent acts against Jews and the destruction of their properties repeatedly occurred.⁶⁶ There

61 K. Brandys, *Miesiące. 1982-1984*, Warszawa 1988, p. 54.

62 Eva Hoffman used these words referring to the silence and collective forgetting about the Holocaust in postwar Poland, *Sztetl*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 6 II 1998, p. 10.

63 About living “next to each other”, particularly its causes, see: A. Hertz, *Żydzi w kulturze polskiej*, Warszawa 2003.

64 See: R. Modras, *Kościół katolicki i antysemityzm w Polsce w latach 1933-1939*, Kraków 2004.

65 See: M. Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto lawkowe, numerus nullus, “paragraf aryjski”*. *Antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931-1939*, Warszawa 1999.

66 See: J. Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935-1937*, Warszawa 1994.

were calls for the boycott of Jewish businesses and plans to solve the Jewish question in Poland.⁶⁷

The distance between Poles and Jews was also strengthened by Polish stereotypes and prejudices towards Jews. Internalisation of these stereotypes was not necessarily equal to anti-Semitism. Most likely, people who simply did not like Jews, who saw them as competition and who shared stereotypes about them out-numbered declared, ideological anti-Semites.

Such an atmosphere of distance and separation prevailed when World War II broke out. Nazi occupiers realised their plan of the Final Solution before Polish eyes. As Franciszek Ryszka noted, however, neither the conclusions drawn from historical knowledge nor empirical manifestations of behaviour suggest that witnessing the Holocaust first-hand made Polish society significantly modify their attitudes towards Jews. Feelings and attitudes resulting from them remained as they had been, “in a wide variety of ethical views”. Also, anti-Semitism did not disappear “as if by magic”⁶⁸ after observing how the Germans treated the Jews. It is thus safe to say that the negative attitude towards Jews must have blunted moral judgement of the Holocaust both as it was taking place and after the war.

Anti-Semitism in Polish society was recorded by the representatives of the Polish Underground State in their memoranda. There were notes about it in the reports and commands of Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) and the Government Delegation for Poland.⁶⁹ Also the Courier Jan Karski informed General Władysław Sikorski, who was staying in France at the time, about the anti-Semitism in occupied Poland, but his note was repressed for many years.

The diagnoses enclosed in some documents of the Polish Underground State were probably right to say that the news about some Jewish acts in eastern Poland after 17 September 1939 intensified the anti-Semitic atmosphere and negative attitudes towards Jews within Polish society. The news was about Jews who welcomed the new occupiers with enthusiasm. It does not matter whether it was true or the image was hoaxed and transformed into myth on the basis of selec-

67 See: A. Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu... Koncepcje rozwiązania kwestii żydowskiej w publicystyce polskiej lat 1933-1939*, Warszawa 1998; W. Mich, *Obcy w polskim domu. Nacjonalistyczne koncepcje rozwiązania problemu mniejszości narodowych 1918-1939*, Lublin 1994.

68 See: F. Ryszka, *Refleksje na temat holocaustu*, [in:] *Historia – polityka – państwo. Wybór studiów*, Toruń 2002, t. I, p. 317, 320.

69 See: J. T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada. Trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i Komunistów 1939-1948*, Kraków 2001, p. 46-47; K. Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm. Anatomia półprawd 1939-68*, Warszawa 1992, p. 15-20.

tive and biased information.⁷⁰ What matters is that the stereotype of Jewish communists (*żydokomuna*) was strengthened or revived and as a result the distance between Poles and Jews was extended.

The most interesting observation made on the basis of the reports of the Polish Underground State was the one by Krystyna Kersten about the “almost complete separation of Jewish martyrdom from the so-called “Jewish question”. According to Kersten, who has analysed historical sources, “the extermination of the Jewish nation taking place before Poles’ eyes” probably did not change anything about “the stereotype of a Jew as a threat which perpetuated in the collective imagination.”⁷¹

What can definitively prove Kersten’s words is a leaflet titled “Protest,” in which Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, a Catholic activist and writer involved in the struggle to save Jews, addressed her compatriots. She appealed to all religious Poles to take an active defensive stand in the face of the atrocity against Jews. She condemned the silence of Poles and of the world, stating: “Those who are silent in the face of murder become accomplices to the crime. Those who do not condemn – approve.” At the same time, however, she claimed: our feelings toward Jews have not changed. We do not stop thinking about them as political, economic and ideological enemies of Poland. Moreover we do realise that they still hate us more than Germans, to the extent that they make us co-responsible for their misfortune. Why? On what basis? It remains the secret of the Jewish soul. Nevertheless, that is a fact that is continuously confirmed. Awareness of those feelings doesn’t relieve us from the duty to condemn the crime.”⁷²

Indeed, it would be hard to find more dramatic evidence of the separation of Jewish martyrdom from the so-called Jewish question, described by Krystyna Kersten. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka’s leaflet proves that the Holocaust did not bring any broad transformation of Polish attitudes towards Jews. Observing it did not contribute to challenging stereotypes, prejudice, and anti-Semitism or reducing the distance between Poles and Jews. The content of the leaflet shows that it was possible to provide aid to Jews and condemn the atrocities against them and at the same time consider Jews as enemies of the Polish nation. Perhaps many anti-Semites saved Jews during the war but regarded them as strangers and enemies. They saved Jews in the name of Christian love, Catholic ethics or some other sense of duty and believed that aiding them was what

70 About Jewish behaviour in the east of Poland after 17 September 1939, See: J.T. Gross, *Upiorna...*, p. 61-93.

71 K. Kersten, op. cit., p. 17.

72 See: Odezwa *Protest!* Konspiracyjnego Frontu Odrodzenia Polski pióra Zofii Kossak, Warszawa, sierpień 1942 r., [in:] *Polacy-Żydzi 1939-1945, Wybór Źródeł*, A.K. Kunert (Ed.), Warszawa 2006, p. 212-213.

should and had to be done. Thus, the instance of Zofia Kossak-Szczucka was not likely to be an isolated case.

However, this case is still a unique point of reference. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka co-founded the Council to Aid Jews (Rada Pomocy Żydom), “Zegota”. Then, as Michael Steinlauf notes, if even a founder of this meritorious organisation was an anti-Semite, “what could one have expected from an average Pole, lacking, let us assume, Kossak’s extraordinary moral sensitivity?” While if she was far from anti-Semitism but believed that referring to Jews as enemies of Poland “would make her appeal more effective”, this manipulation says nothing positive about the attitudes of her contemporaries.⁷³

The pre-war distance between Poles and Jews was thus continued during the war alongside old stereotypes and prejudice. The policy of the occupier contributed to extending the distance, and the division between “we” and “them” was even more firmly grounded.

The Nazis destined Jews for “Special Treatment”. They marked them with stigmatising “Stars of David”, separated them from the rest of society by ghetto walls and attempted to dehumanise them with the help of propaganda, e.g. by comparing them to insects. Above all, the Nazis sentenced the Jewish nation to be the first to die on the basis of racial criteria. They also popularised these criteria in Polish society.⁷⁴

Thus, a group of people was singled out from the suffering and oppressed Polish nation and destined a special fate. The Jews’ situation during German occupation was much harder than the situation of the majority of Poles. Although the Nazis made the lives of both Jews and Poles hell, Jews were placed in its lowest circles, in an atmosphere of contempt, helplessness and loneliness. Such a situation did not in the least bring the two nations closer, but rather extended the distance between them. As Zygmunt Bauman notes, while “equality in suffering unites and heals”, “‘singling out’ part of the sufferers for special treatment leaves hatred and moral terror”.⁷⁵

Therefore, as a result of the distance between them, intensified by the occupiers’ policy, Poles and Jews were dying separately. However, the loneliness and singularity of death was mostly a Jewish experience and that is how Jews have perceived it ever since. Also, some Poles believe that the Holocaust involved only Germans and Jews: perpetrators and victims, and that it did not in-

73 See: M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead. Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York, p. 40.

74 See: K. Kersten, J. Szapiro, *Konteksty współczesnych odniesień polsko-żydowskich*, “Więź” 1998, no 7, p. 286.

75 Z. Bauman, *On immoral reason and illogical morality*, “Polin” 1998, t. 3, p. 296.

volve Poles, even if it struck terror into them and took place before their eyes. The instances of Poles saving Jews do not blur this image: instead, they complete it. Two different communities of memory have developed, one Polish and one Jewish, for during the war the two nations lived in two different worlds, separated by ghetto walls. An inherent feature of the “communities of memory” is that they “cannot possess empathy for the victims in other communities and the phrase, ‘I feel your pain,’ often means merely: ‘I’ll concede that you feel pain’⁷⁶ In the case of Poles and Jews, the communities separated before and during the war by a piercing feeling of distance, these words are particularly true.

What has been said so far about the distance between Poles and Jews as a reason for forgetting the Holocaust and the Jews seems to prove that Marcin Kula was right in stating that if these communities “had been close, one would have cared about the fate of the other and mourned it. Since they were not, the one that survived has not devoted appropriate attention to the one that died”.⁷⁷

Additional circumstances of this distance and oblivion as a consequence of it arose in Poland at the end of the war. Pursuant to the decisions made at the Yalta Conference, Poland was under a new “occupation”: the predominantly Soviet influence. In the new postwar political system, Jews appeared in a completely new role. A moment earlier, their Holocaust was observed. Now they were back as state officials, members of the Office of Public Security [Polish: *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, UB*, the communist secret police, intelligence and counter-espionage service] and members of the communist Polish Workers' Party.⁷⁸ Some may have thought that if Jews were seen in the streets and holding important positions, the information about Holocaust could be an exaggeration and that in fact not so many of them had died during the war.⁷⁹

Although Jews were indeed found in the structures of the new communist power, and some of them held important political positions, their number was exaggerated in the collective imagination. They were thus regarded as usurpers, occupiers and executioners of the heroes from the Home Army who had fought for independence. Jews were viewed as oppressors and new foes working for Stalin. Hatred towards the new authorities incited or flared the hatred towards Jews, seen as personification of the new political power. The belief in the connection between Jews and state authorities was even strengthened by the fact

76 See: C. S. Maier, *Gorąca pamięć...pamięć zimna. O polowicznym okresie rozpadu pamięci faszyzmu i komunizmu*, “Res Publica Nowa” 2001, no 7, p. 32.

77 M. Kula, *Problem postkomunistyczny, czy historycznie ukształtowany polski problem*, “Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” 1991, no 4, p. 33.

78 See: A. Smolar, *Tabu i niewinność*, “Res Publica Nowa” 2001, no 8, p. 57

79 E. Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Świadkowie Zagłady – Holocaust jako zbiorowe doświadczenie Polaków*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny” 2002, no 2, p. 188.

that in the first years after the war, the state addressed the Holocaust survivors very favourably and sympathetically (which will be further discussed later in this chapter). As some researchers suggest, the very fact that Jews held important public positions may have brought dissonance and objections as it violated the social order in which Jews had their own position in social structure and hierarchy.⁸⁰

The stereotype of Jewish communists (*żydokomuna*) revived and the conflict between the authorities and the general populace overlapped with the conflict between Poles and Jews. The stereotype, let us recall, not only survived the war, but it was actually strengthened by the information about Jewish acts in the east of Poland during Soviet occupation. As this stereotype implied the strangeness of the new political power and incited hatred towards the authorities, Jews began to be removed from their positions while those with “good appearance” were encouraged to change their names to ones that sounded more Polish. As a result, authorities were supposed to seem more Polish and familiar and not stimulate the negative connotations that were associated with a Jewish presence.

Not only did anti-Semitism survive the war, it was also intensified by the presence of Jews within new and hated power structures. Perhaps it was also the virulently anti-Semitic propaganda of Nazi occupiers that contributed to its survival and consolidation. Why was this ideology not compromised and undermined? Why did it manage to survive the war when Jews did not? A convincing answer was given by Aleksander Smolar, who described the phenomenon as “a paradox of national unity”.

Although during the war there were traitors who collaborated with the occupiers for money, because of hatred or as a result of torture or blackmail, there was no institutionalised collaboration under the auspices of the Polish state. Poland did not deliver their Petain or Quisling. Left and right wing representatives, communists and nationalists, liberals and conservatives, masons and national Catholics: they all fought together against the Nazis. In other words, representatives of all pre-war political options, parties and organisations, who had almost nothing in common before 1 September 1939, then found a common purpose.

However, while collaborator governments and parties in other occupied European countries disgraced themselves with anti-Semitism, the underground was usually anti-Fascist, democratic and against anti-Semitism (considered as an element of the “traitor syndrome”), anti-Semitism in Poland maintained its patriotic, national and democratic legitimacy. Anti-Semitic National Democracy was a part of the Polish Underground State and the government in exile. According to

80 See: A. Cała, *Kształtowanie się polskiej i żydowskiej wizji martyrologicznej po II wojnie światowej*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny” 2002, no 2, p. 171.

Alekssander Smolar, anti-Semitism in Poland “did not wear the stigma of collaboration with Germans”, it could “prosper perfectly” during the war: “in the street, (...) in the underground press, political parties, and army forces” and also after the war.⁸¹ In other words, during the war one could be both a hero, an ally in the fight for a just cause, and an anti-Semite, which in a way justified anti-Semitism as an accepted and functioning view.

The strength of stereotypes and negative views about Jews also helped Polish anti-Semitism survive the war. The ethnographer Alina Cała, on the basis of studies on the image of Jews in Polish folk culture conducted in 1975, 1976, 1978, and 1984, decided that the Holocaust and the sudden disappearance of Jewish culture even intensified and strengthened anti-Semitism.⁸² Anti-Semitism and prejudices against Jews do not need Jewish presence as legitimisation. Anti-Semitism is a phantasmagorical phenomenon and belongs to a category of images that are independent from reality. One could even say that it develops more efficiently if there are no or hardly any Jews and thus imagination is not restricted.

A particular confirmation that anti-Semitic stereotypes survived in postwar Poland were anti-Jewish pogroms in Rzeszow, Cracow and Kielce, which resulted directly from rumours about alleged blood libels.⁸³ Similar gossip, although never resulting in pogroms, appeared also in July 1946 in Czestochowa, Lodz and Kalisz. The rumour spread in Kalisz said that having murdered their victims, Jews gave their bodies to Ukrainians who processed them into sausages.⁸⁴

Therefore, as it has been already said, the pre-war distance between Poles and Jews, intensified by anti-Semitism, stereotypes, Nazi policy, and the post-war situation, befitted the Polish amnesia concerning Jews and the Holocaust. There are, however, also other circumstances and factors that determined the process of forgetting about Jews and the Holocaust and the need to forget about them.

One of them was certainly the situation in Poland after the war. The ending of the war did not bring Poles complete satisfaction with their regained freedom. The change of occupiers decreed at the Yalta Conference and the turning of Poland into a satellite state under the hegemony of the Soviet Union for decades made Poland face new challenges and new problems. Poles had to struggle with a new reality, one that absorbed their attention much more than brooding over the disappearance of the Jewish community and former Polish-Jewish relations.

81 A. Smolar, op. cit., s. 50-51.

82 See: A. Cała, *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej*, Warszawa 2005, p. 187.

83 About the possible reasons for the postwar awakening of faith in the blood libel; See: M. Zaremba, *Mit mordu rytualnego w powojennej Polsce. Archeologia i hipotezy*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2007, no 2, p. 91-137.

84 See: A. Paczkowski, *Raporty o pogromie*, “Puls” 1989, no 50, p. 22.

Even if the subject of Jews and the Holocaust returned during the communist period, it was used by communist propagandists and no honest debate was possible.

Most importantly, however, after the war Poles were focussed on cultivating their own martyrdom. As Henryk Szlajfer rightly noted, after the war “there were enough graves for years of mourning and memories so as not to care about someone not in fact known.”⁸⁵ Almost every Polish family had someone to lament over, or suffered terror and uncertainty, scarcity or poverty of the time of occupation. War losses afflicted almost every family, not to mention material damages. Communities of memory, as already mentioned, cultivate memories of their own suffering and are impregnable against the suffering of other communities. Moreover, Poles have always tended to contemplate the sufferings and wrongs done to them, for which the twists and turns of national history have provided many reasons.

It is worth mentioning that the Polish nation likes to feel proud of its own heroism, sacrifice, resistance and struggle. Poles often recall various uprisings, rebellions against the occupiers’ attempts to denationalise them, and the evidence of their struggles “for your freedom and for ours”. World War II also provided a wide range of reasons for national pride, examples of resistance, fight and sacrifice. It has an important position in the Polish collective memory, as it also did at the times of the People’s Republic of Poland, according to the study of Barbara Szacka.⁸⁶ Poles, as one historian noticed, use World War II as a means of improving their mood, as a compensation for failures, confirmation of their uniqueness and as an ersatz success.⁸⁷ The memory of war suffering and heroism is something that certainly unites them and makes them feel appreciated. Brooding over the Holocaust and Jews disturbs this black and white image of the war and can divide Poles.

Here we approach another reason for forgetting about the Holocaust and Jews: the postwar “competition” between Poles and Jews for the precedence in suffering. This competition has involved both sides up until now. It is unequal, however, as the Nazi policy towards Jews and Poles was not equal and their fate dissimilar. Ignoring this dissimilarity not only proves short-sightedness but also leads to risky interpretations and intellectual misuse. Contemplating the memory of their martyrdom, Poles do not want to remember the enormous difference of

85 See: H. Szlajfer, *Polacy/Żydzi. Zderzenie stereotypów. Esej dla przyjaciół i imych*, Warszawa 2003, p. 14.

86 See: B. Szacka, A. Sawisz, *Czas przeszły i pamięć społeczna. Przemiany świadomości historycznej inteligencji polskiej 1965-1988*, Warszawa 1990.

87 See: T. Szarota, *Wojna na pocieszenia*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 6 IX 1996, p. 14.

the Jewish situation relative to their own. Whole Jewish families were killed on the basis of their origin and the extermination camps were intended to murder the whole Jewish nation. Poles deny these “obvious facts” – as Stanisław Krajewski noted – “as if they were afraid these facts could belittle the sufferings of Poles”.⁸⁸ These denials are based on reinterpretations, half-truths and rhetorical misuse, which are intended to let Poles maintain the glory of their unquestioned suffering and heroism.

First of all, from a Polish point of view, Polish and Jewish war fates are considered to be identical and the differences between their situations are disregarded. Sometimes there are even voices that suggest that Nazi schemes intended Poles to be the next to be exterminated but that the Germans did not manage to implement their plan. Therefore, while before the war Poles envied Jewish positions and money, after the war, they also envied ghettos and crematoria chimneys.⁸⁹

Secondly, people tend to forget that behind the number of Polish war victims, overestimated and falsified by propagandists, there are 3 million Polish Jews who were post mortem categorised as Poles, even if they had been treated as second class citizens while alive.

Thirdly, during and after the war, Jews were criticised for their passivity, that is, for not having resisted the Nazis. The myth of passivity managed to survive the war.⁹⁰ In this context, the Polish attitude was thought to be an antithesis of Jewish passivity and a reason to be proud.

Last but not least, there was yet another reason to forget about Jews and the Holocaust in the name of the heroic-martyred vision of the war. Memories of them would evoke questions about Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust and bring discomfort, disturb the construct of national identity based on martyr-like tendencies and heroic motives and force Poles to deconstruct it. Moreover, it is justified to believe that Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust were the main reason to forget about Jews and the unprecedented event that was the Holocaust. I do not want to belittle the other reasons for this particular oblivion that have been already mentioned. I only claim – and not only I – that the “punishment of witnessing” imposed on Poles by the Nazi occupiers left them injured and burdened with the sin of guilt and omission.⁹¹ Therefore, the answer to the question

88 S. Krajewski, “*Problematyka żydowska*” – *problem polski*, “Więź” 1992, no 4, p. 34.

89 See: H. Szlajfer, *op. cit.*, p. 64-68.

90 The myth of passivity was deconstructed by Grzegorz Kołacz. See: G. Kołacz, *Czasami trudno się bronić. Uwarunkowania postawy Żydów podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce*, Warszawa 2008.

91 See: A. Smolar, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

as to what demanded to be forgotten and how sums up the Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust.

As has been already stated, the Holocaust was not an event that was impossible to observe, but it certainly was impossible to comprehend. It was not organised in Poland because of its anti-Semitic atmosphere or alleged social consent, as some people claim. It was organised in Poland for logistic reasons. In comparison to other European countries, Poland was inhabited by the greatest number of Jews. Poland became the main arena of the Holocaust and Poles were forced to be its witnesses, or bystanders. The Holocaust was an event that, according to the Raul Hilberg definition, involved perpetrators, victims and bystanders.⁹² If the Holocaust was an unprecedented event, so was witnessing it.⁹³

What were the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust then? In her analysis of this question, Antonina Kłoskowska noted that it was not possible to present the full picture, for some facts are impossible to reconstruct and it was unlikely to “determine the proportions of different types of human behaviour”. It is not possible because witnesses pass away and their memories are subjected to interpretation and selection.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, it is possible to present average and general categories of the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust. Let us start with the most isolated and extreme ones: Poles who saved Jews and Poles who supported the Nazis in implementing their plan of the “Final Solution”.

Neither group constituted a majority of the Polish society. Similarly, as the theories of common collaboration between Poles and their occupants are ordinary lies, so are the conforming statements about mass aid given to Jews. There was Polish Council to Aid Jews “Zegota”⁹⁵, there were Polish heroes who risked their lives to help Jews despite the restrictive regulations introduced by the Nazis and capital punishment for helping and hiding Jews. The evidence of their existence can be found in the Jerusalem institute Yad Vashem, where olive trees grow, and in the titles of the “Righteous Among the Nations”. Most of the

92 See: R. Hilberg, R. Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe, 1933-1945*, Aaron Asher Books, NY, 1992.

93 As Michael Steinlauf noted. See: R. Steinlauf, *Refleksje nad cieniem Holokaustu w Polsce powojennej* [in:], *Holocaust z perspektywy półwiecza. Pięćdziesiąta rocznica Powstania w Getcie Warszawskim. Materiały z konferencji zorganizowanej przez Żydowski Instytut Historyczny w dniach 29-31 marca 1993*, D. Grinberg, P. Szapiro (Eds.), Warszawa 1993, p. 86.

94 See: A. Kłoskowska, *Polacy wobec zagłady Żydów polskich. Próba typologii postaw*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 1998, no 4, p. 111.

95 See: I. Tomaszewski, T. Werbowski, *Zegota. The Rescue of Jews in Wartime Poland*, Price-Patterson., Montreal 1994; T. Prekerowa, *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Żydom 1942-1943*, Warszawa 1981.

“Righteous” are Poles – not because the Polish nation was particularly willing to make sacrifices and risk their lives, but because Poland was the main arena of the Holocaust. It is, however, often forgotten and hidden behind the olive trees of Yad Vashem, which are intended to refute the accusations of passivity and indifference.

Unfortunately, there were also Poles who made their infamous contribution to the Holocaust and demonstrated an “actively hostile attitude”.⁹⁶ With their own free will, they participated in the murders of Jews organised by the Germans or even committed these murders on their own during the war.⁹⁷ The Jedwabne pogrom is the most famous example of this kind of attitude, but, unfortunately, not the only one. There were many more similar events in the region and all of them proceeded according to a very similar scenario.⁹⁸

There were many more Poles, however, who did not participate in pogroms but denounced and blackmailed hiding Jews, profiting from their tragedy. They also significantly hindered the efforts of those who provided help to Jews. Sometimes it was their main source of income, a kind of profession, sometimes only incidental behaviour stemming from a temptation for easy profit and convenient circumstances. Jan Grabowski, the author of a pioneering work about *szmalcownictwo* in Poland [blackmailing Jews who were hiding, or blackmailing Poles who protected Jews], argues that contrary to popular opinions, this phenomenon was not “a marginal behaviour but a source of income for thousands of people”.⁹⁹ His research findings are confirmed by many wartime memoirs (not only by Jewish authors) in which one can find a returning motif of the fear of Polish *szmalcownik*s and denunciation by Poles. Underground press pro-

96 “Actively hostile attitude” is one of the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust distinguished by Antonina Kłoskowska and based on behavioural criteria. It is the attitude of those who “participated in the persecution and extermination of Jews, in any form except direct compulsion, that is, terror of the occupant. Such an activity, regardless of its motives, can be defined as complicity in the crime”. See: A. Kłoskowska, op. cit., p. 113.

97 See: B. Engelking-Boni, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945*, Warszawa 2011; J. Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945. Studium dziejów jednego powiatu*, Warszawa 2011.

98 See: A. Żbikowski, *U genezy Jedwabnego. Żydzi na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej. Wrzesień 1939 – lipiec 1941*, Warszawa 2006, p. 213-233; P. Machcewicz, *Wokół Jedwabnego*, [in:] *Wokół Jedwabnego*, P. Machcewicz, K. Persak (Eds.), Warszawa 2002, t. 1, p. 9-63; A. Żbikowski, *Pogromy i mordy ludności żydowskiej w Łomżyńskim i na Białostocczyźnie latem 1941 roku w świetle relacji ocalałych Żydów i dokumentów sądowych*, [in:] *Wokół Jedwabnego*, op. cit., p. 159-273.

99 See: J. Grabowski, “*Ja tego Żyda znam!*”. *Szantażowanie Żydów w Warszawie 1939-1943*, Warszawa 2004, p. 8.

vided up-to-date information about it. The problem was also described by the leading archivist of the Holocaust, Emanuel Ringelblum.¹⁰⁰ Needless to say, not every Pole who denounced Jews and disclosed their hideouts hoped for some kind of payment from Germans or blackmailed Jews. Such behaviour was also motivated by the fear of their own life and the life of their families.

Heroic and disgraceful behaviour is only one element of the overall attitude of Poles towards the extermination of the Jews. There was a passive crowd of bystanders surrounding the heroes and *szmalcowniki*, and as with any tragedy, the passive bystanders made up the largest group. Some of them were Poles who observed the Holocaust with “reluctant passivity.”¹⁰¹ They entered the wartime with a baggage of stereotypes and prejudices against Jews, and the Holocaust taking place before their eyes did nothing to change their opinions. Perhaps some of them felt some sort of satisfaction that the “Jewish question” would be solved without their own participation, although with their silent approval. They were the ones who Zygmunt Bauman described as those who “could do something, maybe even a lot, but they did not want to or were not convinced that the murders in front of their eyes were something bad.”¹⁰² They, and all those who did not give aid to Jews when it was possible, were the ones about whom Franciszek Ryszka said they had committed “criminal omission.”¹⁰³

There were also Poles, probably many of them, who felt sympathy and compassion towards Jews, and terror because of their suffering (“sympathetic passivity”).¹⁰⁴ They observed the Holocaust with terror but could not do anything. Some turned their heads away because they could do little, some decided it was a problem of Jews and Germans and not theirs. The latter observed the Jewish tragedy with indifference resulting from the long-standing distance and cultural and religious strangeness. For them, Jews had always been outside the borders of the Polish community. Their attitude could perhaps be labelled as “reluctant passivity”. Indifference, however, was also a form of defensive response to the helplessness against the scenes of Holocaust they were observing.¹⁰⁵

100 See: E. Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie drugiej wojny światowej*, Warszawa 1988.

101 See: A. Kłoskowska, op. cit., p. 116.

102 Z. Bauman, *Holokaust: pięćdziesiąt lat później*, [in:] *Holokaust z perspektywy półwiecza. Pięćdziesiąta rocznica Powstania w Getcie Warszawskim. Materiały z konferencji zorganizowanej przez Żydowski Instytut Historyczny w dniach 29-31 marca 1993*, D. Grinberg, P. Szapiro (Eds.), Warszawa 1993, p. 33.

103 See: F. Ryszka, op. cit., p. 309.

104 See: A. Kłoskowska, op. cit., p. 118-127.

105 See: B. Szaynok, *Problem antysemityzmu w relacjach polsko-żydowskich w latach 1945-1953*, [in:] *Zagłada Żydów. Pamięć narodowa a pisanie historii w Polsce i we*

In any case, all of them – reluctant, sympathetic or indifferent – remained passive. This passivity sometimes resulted from the Nazi regulations, according to which helping Jews was punished by death – many times Poles paid this price. In other words, passivity need not be equal to lack of sympathy and to indifference. However, while German terror could explain passivity from fear, it did not hinder or justify a lack of sympathy. The symbol of the indifference towards murdered Jews is the merry-go-round next to the Ghetto walls, described in Czesław Miłosz's poem. This indifference is also often mentioned by Holocaust survivors. Franciszek Ryszka was undoubtedly right, writing that the greatest Polish sin from the war was "the inability to see, in a universal way, our fellow human beings tortured beyond all measure" and that our penitence for this sin would have to last for a long time.¹⁰⁶

According to the often-quoted Antonina Kłoskowska, one can hypothetically assume that "reluctant passivity and sympathetic indifference were the most common attitudes [towards the Holocaust – author's note] characteristic of Polish society in general."¹⁰⁷ In other words, the prevailing attitude of Poles towards the Holocaust was indifference: sympathetic, indifferent, reluctant or even hostile, which poses a significant moral problem. To conclude, we may say that passive and indifferent bystanders were a dominating group of Polish society, rather than the Righteous Among the Nations and *szmalcowniki*.

If passivity towards the Holocaust characterised the attitude of the majority of Polish society during the war, then perhaps this was the reason why our Righteous were forgotten for many years. Remembering them could bring discomfort to the rest of the society. After all, the attitude of the Righteous was a deviation from the standard of conduct, an exception from (and thus a reminder of) the almost widespread passivity. Whoever came to rescue Jews provided the irrefutable evidence that it was possible to violate the rules imposed by the occupiers. Therefore, the Righteous may have awoken the guilty conscience of the passive bystanders arising from the murder of 3 million Jewish citizens. This is, however, only a supposition.

On the other hand, there is evidence that Polish heroes, who should have been honoured and revered for life, were afraid to confess their heroic deeds and sometimes asked the Jews they saved to help them remain anonymous.¹⁰⁸ Was it

Francji, B. Engelking, J. Leociak, D. Libionka, A. Ziębińska-Witek (Eds.), Lublin 2006, p. 236.

106 See: F. Ryszka, op. cit., p. 321.

107 A. Kłoskowska, op. cit., p. 117.

108 See: M. Borwicz, *List do Redakcji*, "Kultura" (Paryż) 1957, no 11, p. 47; M. Hochberg-Mariańska, N. Grüss (Eds.), *Dzieci oskarżają*, Kraków-Lódź-Warszawa 1947,

only a fear of the envious environment and their imagination that conjured up the visions of gold, diamonds and other goods that the savers were widely supposed to have gained for their help? Or, perhaps, it was not befitting for a Pole to help Jews; coming to their aid was seen as dishonour, as something discrediting and deserving infamy. Or maybe Jan Tomasz Gross was right in saying that the Righteous were afraid to confess their sacrifice because they had “breached the existing canon of behaviour” and for this reason the local community “might have felt threatened”. Gross also suggested that the Righteous treated Jews differently than the “actively hostile” group and, in particular, the passive rest, and nothing bound them to the “community of silence” formed after the war.”¹⁰⁹ Even if none of these questions leads to the right track to the truth, how can one explain the fact that after the war, the Righteous were afraid to confess to having saved Jewish lives?

Years later, Gross’s suppositions were confirmed by the case of Antonina Wyrzykowska. In the course of the debate about the Jedwabne pogrom, this modest woman, who had saved Jews from certain death, was sentenced to ostracism by her “neighbours” from Jedwabne. Surrounded by reluctance and suspicion, she had to relocate and then lived in solitude¹¹⁰ because she did not follow the “canon of conduct” and made the community feel guilty. Antonina Wyrzykowska reminded people of their passivity and complicity through her undoubted heroism.

Therefore, the continuum of Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust consists of the Righteous, of *szmalcownik*s and, in particular, of passive bystanders. The overpowering social need to forget about Jews and the Holocaust was particularly relevant to the last two attitudes. People wanted to forget about Poles who supported the Nazis in their plan of the “Final Solution” and tarnished the reputation of the national community. Most of all, they wanted to erase the memory of their own passivity, sometimes indifferent, sometimes reluctant, sometimes even hostile, which collided with the heroic and martyred vision of the war.

The role of passive bystanders in the extermination of the people that Poles had shared their land with for hundreds of years, Krystyna Kersten wrote, “caused anxiety which was not always realised”.¹¹¹ Part of this anxiety was also the ballast of the difficult Polish-Jewish past. The Holocaust and the Jewish question inevitably reminded Poles about it. Hence, they were covered with si-

p. XXXII; J. T. Gross, *Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści*, Kraków 2008.

109 See: J. T. Gross, *Upiorna...*, p. 60.

110 See: A. Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego*, Warszawa 2004, p. 249-256.

111 See: K. Kersten, op. cit., p. 150.

lence and became a taboo and, as a result, were forgotten. The reason for this collective amnesia was the “particularly disturbing nature of what demanded to be remembered” and, at the same time, “mental numbness and sense of guilt.”¹¹² In the house of the deceased, anything that can cause pain is not mentioned, particularly anything that could cast a shadow on the living.

Both the anxiety and sense of guilt were additionally strengthened by the fact that Poles had been involved in a kind of corruption related to the Holocaust.¹¹³ As a result of the Nazi extermination policy, properties of 3 million murdered Jews, provided they had not been seized by the Germans, became Polish property. Former Jewish homes, land, factories, shops, workshops, synagogue buildings and everyday objects changed hands. Although Poles did not deprive Jews of their ownership, they became beneficiaries of historical injustice and owners of goods that had been paid for with Jewish suffering. Those who came into possession of properties of their murdered neighbours, however, must have felt discomfort. Thus, the new proprietors desperately wanted to forget about the former owners and about what had happened to them.

In the first years after the war, the Holocaust survivors returning to their hometowns were rarely welcomed with joy or sympathy, but rather with confusion and reluctance.¹¹⁴ Their homes, workshops, shops and other material goods already had new owners who were not always willing to go back to the pre-war status quo. Sometimes the attempts to defend oneself against the restitution and solve the problem of financial demands ended in blackmails, assaults or killings.¹¹⁵ During the war, there were already cases of denouncing and killing the hiding Jews in order to “anticipate” the necessity of giving their properties back after the war. However, the desire to maintain Jewish properties cannot fully explain the phenomenon of postwar violence against the Holocaust survivors. Neither can it explain the atmosphere of reluctance surrounding Jews after the war.

112 See: E. Hoffman, *Sztetl*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 6 II 1998, p. 10.

113 As Feliks Tych noted, Polish society was corrupted by the occupiers in two ways. First, it was moral corruption: Polish witnesses were shown that such grave crimes against Jews could go unpunished. Besides, Polish society was not completely impregnable to German anti-Semitic propaganda. Second, it was corruption in the common sense of the word: material goods belonging to murdered Jews fell into the hands of Polish citizens in different ways. See: F. Tych, *Długi cień...*, p. 89.

114 See: np. A. Skibińska, *Powroty ocalałych*, [in:] *Prowincja noc. Życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim*, B. Engelking, J. Leociak, D. Libionka, Warszawa 2007, p. 505-600.

115 J. T. Gross, *Fear; Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation*, Random House, New York 2007.

According to different sources, a few hundred to three thousand Jews died in Poland in the period 1944-1947.¹¹⁶ Jews were killed by their neighbours who had been occupying their homes and had taken over their jobs. They were also killed in robbery attacks, including “train campaigns”, when travelling Jews were caught and drawn out of a train and then shot.¹¹⁷ Finally, they were killed by partisans and by nameless mobs in pogroms.

Although the Kielce pogrom is the most well-known and had the highest death toll, it was not the only event where the vector of hatred was directed against Jews. Similar incidents (but on a smaller scale) occurred also in Cracow, Rzeszow, Chrzanow, Radom, Miechow, Rabka and other places.¹¹⁸ In all of these places, the members of local communities, consumed by mob mentality, took violent action against Jews. It is unimportant whether they were inspired, provoked or spontaneously gave vent to their resentments. What matters is that their negative emotions manifested themselves in the form of violence against Jews. Even if these emotions had been artificially stirred up and the events provoked, it only proves the actuality of the phobias and prejudices and cannot justify such heinous events in any way. In other words, this violent reaction by ordinary Polish people was a clear indication that approval for such acts was widespread.

What were the other reasons for the aggression directed at Jews if the fear of their restitution demands was not the only one? Without doubt, human life generally lost its value in the first years after the war as a result of the omnipresence of death and general demoralisation. Jewish lives were worth even less after how the Nazis had treated them and how the Poles had observed this treatment. Poles were the witnesses of attempts to dehumanise Jews, of killing them with impunity and extreme cruelty. Perhaps some thought these war acts could be still practiced and Jews could be killed without any reason.

116 See: J. Adelson, *W Polsce zwanej Ludową*, [in:] *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce*, J. Tomaszewski (red.), Warszawa 1993, p. 401; I. Gutman, *Żydzi w Polsce po II wojnie światowej – Akcja kalumnii i zabójstw*, “Przegląd Prasy Zagranicznej” 1986, no 2, p. 62; N. Aleksiu, *Ruch syjonistyczny wobec systemu rządów w Polsce w latach 1944-1948*, [in:] *Komunizm. Ideologia, system, ludzie*, T. Szarota (Ed.), Warszawa 2001, p. 242; D. Engel, *Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944-1946*, *Yad Vashem Studies* 1998, no. 26, p. 43-47; J. Michlic, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland 1918-1938 and 1945-1947*, “Polin” 2000, t. 13, p. 34-61; J. T. Gross, *Strach...*, p.57-58.

117 “Train campaigns” were conducted mostly by National Armed Forces. Around 200 Jews, repatriates from the Soviet Union, died as a result of the campaign. Jews were caught and drawn out of a train and then shot – only on the basis of their origin. See: J. Adelson, *W Polsce zwanej...*, p. 393.

118 See: A. Cichopek, *Pogrom Żydów w Krakowie 11 sierpnia 1945 r.*, Warszawa 2000; J. T. Gross, *Fear...*

Moreover, as has been already mentioned, anti-Semitism survived the war alongside a negative attitude towards Jews, stereotypes and prejudices. The crowning (and most extreme) evidence of the power of anti-Semitic stereotypes after the war were pogroms caused by rumours about the Jewish blood libel.

Yet another possible explanation of the hostility towards Jews is that they were associated with the new authorities. From this perspective, violence against Jews should be interpreted as aggression aimed at Jews as governors and executors of the state authority perceived as an enemy rather than at Jews themselves. In such cases, the responsibility for manifestations of this aggression should be attached to the anti-communist underground or soldiers from the National Armed Forces. While perhaps this theory was true in some cases, in common consciousness the number of Jewish communist officials was additionally exaggerated.¹¹⁹ However, as Krystyna Kersten noted, “no Jews in authority were needed to make the wave of anti-Jewish mood increase.”¹²⁰ Kersten’s observation was confirmed by research conducted by Alina Cała who demonstrated that only a few murders of Jews in postwar Poland had, without any doubt, the character of “political assassinations of the UB officials, party activists or local authorities.”¹²¹

What other answers can be found to the question of the cause of violence against Jews in Poland after the Holocaust? Both above-quoted scholars present an additional possible explanation, which is the psychological mechanism of displacement and using Jews as scapegoats. The situation of Poles after the war must have brought frustration, a sense of defeat and hopelessness, resulting in aggression, which could not be channelled into an open conflict with those in fact responsible for the position of Poland after the Yalta Conference. Hence the need emerged to find a substitute enemy and to transfer the aggression born from hopelessness and frustration to the “scapegoat”.

Jews seemed perfect to perform such a role: weak and decimated after the war, and yet perceived as ubiquitous and representing the new authority.¹²² Moreover, the stereotypes about them and the pre-war distance and discomfort

119 There were rumours in Poland about millions of Jewish repatriates returning from the Soviet Union to supply the communist movement and seize power, which was already believed to lie in Jewish hands. For more on rumours and gossip and their influence on social atmosphere in Poland in the Stalinist era, See: D. Jarosz, M. Pasztor, *W krzywym zwierciadle. Polityka władz komunistycznych w Polsce w świetle plotek i pogłosek z lat 1949-56*, Warszawa 1995.

120 K. Kersten, op. cit., p. 85.

121 See: A. Cała, *Przekleństwo pamięci...*, p. 195-198.

122 See: K. Kersten, op. cit., p. 79-80; A. Cała, *Kształtowanie się polskiej i żydowskiej...*, 167-172.

between Poles and Jews were still alive. In addition, it was relatively easy to displace aggression to them because of their status as victims. Victims, as Aleksander Smolar noted, almost always arouse suspicion that they are not without fault and “have their part in the crime”.¹²³ Connecting Jews with any kind of evil – blood libel, communism or anything else – was of great importance for Poles as the bystanders of the Holocaust. This process helped rationalise and justify Polish indifference towards (or even complicity in) the Holocaust, relieve discomfort and forget about its original cause.

Michael Steinlauf also provided a psychological interpretation of aggression and aversion towards the Holocaust survivors. He referred to the findings of the psychiatrist and historian Robert Jay Lifton who had conducted research on the effects of trauma related to witnessing death and destruction on a mass scale. In his work on this subject, titled “The Broken Connection”, Lifton listed a few characteristic “core themes” or “struggles” of the survivors of massive death trauma.¹²⁴ The first of these is what Lifton called the “Death Imprint”¹²⁵ and described as the “radical intrusion of an image-feeling of threat or end to life”. What Lifton terms “Death Guilt” arises “from the encounter with a situation on which the possibilities for physical or even psychic response are nonexistent”¹²⁶ and “one feels responsible for what one has not done, for what one has not felt, and above all for the gap between that physical and psychic inactivation and what one felt called upon (by the beginning image formation) to do and feel”.

According to Robert J. Lifton, “the heart of the traumatic syndrome” is “psychic numbing”. This condition, often involuntary and unconscious, diminishes “the capacity to feel, that is, to witness”. It includes denial and the strategy of “interruption of identification” with the victim (“I see you dying but I’m not related to you or to your death”¹²⁷). Psychic numbing

is characteristically accompanied by anger, rage and violence through which the survivor attempts to regain some sense of vitality. It is also accompanied by a symptom that Freud first noted and termed the “repetition compulsion”. Unable fully to witness the traumatic experience, the survivor obsessively repeats images and even behaviour associated with it. Ultimately the survivor struggles toward what Lifton calls “formulation”, a restructuring of the psyche, its values and symbols, that includes the traumatic image. This process ideally ends in

123 A. Smolar, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

124 The theory of Robert J. Lifton was discussed on the basis of Michael Steinlauf’s book: M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead. Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York

125 *Ibidem*, p. 57

126 *Ibidem*, p. 57

127 *Ibidem*, p. 57

psychic and moral renewal; its goal is “emancipation from the bondage to the diseased.”¹²⁸ But what happens if the feeling is blocked?¹²⁹

According to Robert J. Lifton, the history of the 19th century

furnishes examples of entire societies that have experienced massive death trauma without the opportunity for renewal. The consequences have been the reinforcement of guilt, denial, anger, and psychic numbing, “a vicious circle of unmastered history”, as Lifton puts it (...). Particularly during periods that Lifton calls ‘protean historical situations’ (...) traumatized societies are often attracted to new ‘totalistic programs’ rooted in violence and death. Such “totalisms (...) seek to ‘master the death immersion – the ‘traumatic situation’ – by having it in some way reenacted (on the order of the “repetition compulsion”), changing or rearranging participants, but always in onrush of survival on the part of oneself or one’s group”. Inseparable from this strategy is victimization, the creation of a “death-tainted group”, a group of scapegoats that allows the survivors to turn themselves from passive victimized to passive victimizers, while nevertheless retaining the image of themselves as victims. The result is “a perpetual victim-victimizer ethos” [such as] every act of aggression against the target group is understood as anticipatory ‘defense’, appropriate revenge, or combination of both.¹³⁰

Applying the Robert Lifton theory to analyse the aggression and reluctance towards the Holocaust survivors in postwar Poland, some modifications are needed. Modification of Lifton’s theory does not distort it but only strengthens its meaning and makes it even more adequate for interpreting the discussed phenomenon.

First of all, as Michael Steinlauf noted, the “death guilt” of Poles did not only result from witnessing the Holocaust and the hopelessness in the face of it. It was evoked by the ballast of the difficult, recent and distant Polish-Jewish past: the pre-war reluctance towards Jews, anti-Semitism, the “reluctant passivity” of the wartime, and the cases of evident complicity of Poles in the Holocaust. All these factors, which have been already discussed, must have intensified the “death guilt”, as well as the fact of seizing the properties of the murdered Jewish neighbours, which also generated discomfort.

Secondly, Steinlauf explains, Poles had no need to invent new totalitarianism due to “the imposition of Communists rule”¹³¹, which only intensified the

128 About the Freudian “repetition-compulsion” See: S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Broadview Press, 2011 p. 59-65, 74-77.

129 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead...*, p.57

130 See: M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead...*, p.58

131 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead...*, p.60

feeling of harm. The new political situation hindered the process of getting over the trauma of witnessing the Holocaust and thwarted mental recovery. It also generated hopelessness and frustration resulting in aggression that was not directed at those who were in fact to blame for the situation of Polish society, but channelled into Jews as the substitute scapegoats, who also reminded Poles about the death guilt and made it impossible to suppress.¹³² “With no hope of healing”¹³³, Poles could only change from the passive victimised into active victimisers.

As Michael Steinlauf notes, the “death guilt” in Poland must have been all the more powerful than Lifton’s paradigm would suggest, “for being unrelated [for the most part] to any actual transgression.... As witnesses, Poles had committed no crime, there was nothing to expiate – yet Polish history had loaded the act of witnessing the Holocaust to spring a psychological and moral trap from which there was no apparent exit. The unacceptable, unmasterable guilt could only be denied and repressed, thereafter to erupt into history in particularly distorted forms....” What is more, Steinlauf writes, “the guilt-driven hostility and violence that greeted Jews in postwar Poland resulted in (...) the creation of even more guilt.”¹³⁴

Lifton’s theory, analysed by Michael Steinlauf, and its application to the situation in postwar Poland is thus an attempt to explain the violence (actions) against Jews and resentments (feelings) towards them, rooted in Polish experience and witnessing of the Holocaust. According to this theory, hatred and aggression towards Jews are evoked by a repressed sense of guilt.¹³⁵ As Lifton presents the causes and circumstances of repressing information, which are uncomfortable for the collective psyche, his theory can also explain the phenomenon of collective forgetting about Jews and the Holocaust in Poland after 1945. It can

132 At one of the conferences about the Holocaust, Michael Steinlauf expressed an opinion that the presence of even a few Jews in Poland was a “living pang of conscience, which made it difficult to deaden the guilt” He also raised a question whether the aggression against Jews should not be interpreted as “an outburst of suppressed guilt directed (...) exactly against supposed accusers?”. See: M. Steinlauf, *Refleksje nad cieniem Holocaustu...*, p. 93.

133 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead...*, p.60

134 See: M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, p. 61

135 Agnes Heller came to similar conclusions. Referring to postwar Hungary, she wrote: “Until then, only the Nazis had manifested hatred against Jews, while the rest were indifferent. But then some other, almost irrational hatred appeared, driven by seemingly simple motives: people did not want to give houses, flats and furniture, etc., back to Jews. However, this hatred resulted in fact from suppression, and the stronger it was, the more aggression and aversion it generated”. See: A. Heller, *Pamięć i zapominanie. O sensie i braku sensu*, “Przegląd Polityczny” 2001, no 52/53, p. 25.

thus be used as a supplement to what has already been said about the reasons and determinants of this particular process of collective amnesia. However, there is one reason that has not been mentioned yet.

Almost 3 million Polish Jews were killed in the Holocaust, 90% of whom had lived in Poland before the war. The dream of Polish nationalists for a national state (and they were not alone in having this dream) came true as, in the postwar landscape, no national minorities were to be found. Although the statistics showed that some representatives of ethnic minorities lived there, postwar Poland was no longer the multinational homeland of many ethnic groups. Few Jews decided to stay in Poland and even they soon left the country during successive emigration waves caused by the anti-Semitic atmosphere and persecutions. Among those who left were also Jews who could not imagine living “in a cemetery.”¹³⁶ According to Marcin Kula, Poland lacked “the elementary medium of memory, which is the community itself as a potential object of memories and narratives.”¹³⁷ One should add that community as a *subject* of memories and narratives was also missing. There was no Jewish community of memory – it had either been destroyed or left Poland.

Who does not survive has no history, Agnes Heller says, and the majority of Polish Jews did not survive.¹³⁸ There were others writing and speaking of their history and, for some reason, their aim was not to provide a comprehensive and possibly objective narrative of the life of the Jewish community in Poland and, in particular, about how it was all ended by the Holocaust. It was simply much easier to make this subject disappear in the war hell experienced by Poles and to reinterpret or ignore the uncomfortable topic of the Holocaust. In other words, it was easier to compose a new and comfortable story of the Shoah. This story had an advantage of healing sick souls, soothing consciences, overcoming “moral anxiety”, alleviating the difficult past and enabling and supporting its forgetting.

Thus, let us shift from the analysis of common memory to official memory and to the subject of forgetting about the Holocaust propagated in the People’s Republic of Poland. There were two kinds of official lies: the falsity of silence and the falsity of words and deeds.¹³⁹

136 For more on the postwar waves of Jewish emigration from Poland and their reasons for departing, see: *np. M. Pisarski, Emigracja Żydów z Polski w latach 1945-1951, [in:] Studia z dziejów i kultury Żydów w Polsce po 1945 roku, J. Tomaszewski (Ed.), Warszawa 1997, p. 13-83; See: także B. Szaynok, Z historii i Moskwą w tle. Polska a Izrael 1944-1968, Warszawa 2007.*

137 M. Kula, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

138 A. Heller, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

139 K. Kersten, J. Szapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

3. From autonomy to repression

In comparison to later periods, in the first years after the war a lot was said and written in public about Jews. Difficult and sensitive subjects were not omitted. Some Polish intellectuals made a brave attempt to face the challenges and ghosts of the recent past in magazines such as “Odrodzenie”, “Tygodnik Powszechny”, “Kuźnica” and “Twórczość”. They wrote about anti-Semitism, both before and after the war. They asked about Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust and pointed at the prevailing indifference. They said harsh words about Poles who had supported the Nazis in the Holocaust or took part in pogroms and murdered Jews after the war.¹⁴⁰

The Holocaust and the problem of the attitudes of Polish society towards the Holocaust were reflected not only in the Polish press, but also film¹⁴¹ and, in particular, in Polish poetry and literature. The evidence is the works of poets and writers such as: Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Zagórski, Stanisław Wygodzki, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Zofia Nałkowska, Krystyna Żywulska, Tadeusz Breza, Adolf Rudnicki, Kazimierz Brandys, Stefan Otwinowski and Tadeusz Borowski.¹⁴² The first postwar textbooks provided information about the Holocaust in a relatively extensive, if still somewhat fragmentary fashion. Until the political transition, no subsequent textbooks devoted more space to the subject and, in addition, they all distorted its image.¹⁴³ Polish historians also devoted their attention to studies of the Holocaust.¹⁴⁴ Such relative freedom of speech and research on

140 See: J. Michlic, *Holokaust i wczesne lata powojenne w świadomości Polaków*, “Miodrasz” 2005, no 1, p. 27-36; See: także D. Libionka, *Antysemityzm i zagłada na łamach prasy w Polsce w latach 1945-1946*, [in:] *Polska 1944/45-1989. Studia i Materiały*, Warszawa 1997, p. 151-190; J. Andrzejewski (Ed.), *Martwa fala. Zbiór artykułów o antysemityzmie*, Warszawa 1947.

141 Considering the production year (1948), Aleksander Ford’s film “Ulica graniczna” (released 1949) should be perceived as a daring representation of the Holocaust and, in particular, of the Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation. The movie provoked considerable controversy and sparked off a debate in the media at the time. See: P. Litka, *Polacy i Żydzi w Ulicy Granicznej*, “Kwartalnik Filmowy” 2000, no 29-30, p. 60-74.

142 See: A. Brodzka-Wald, D. Krawczyńska, J. Leociak, *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, Warszawa 2000; N. Gross, *Poeci i Szoa: obraz zagłady Żydów w poezji polskiej*, Sosnowiec 1993; I. Maciejewska (Ed.), *Męczeństwo i zagłada Żydów w zapisach literatury polskiej*, Warszawa 1988; W. Panas, *Pismo i rana. Szkice o problematyce żydowskiej w literaturze polskiej*, Lublin 1996;

143 See: A. Radziwiłł, *The Teaching of the History of the Jews in Secondary Schools in the Polish People’s Republic, 1949-1988*, “Polin” 1989, t. 4, p. 413-414.

144 See: L. Dobroszycki, *Polska historiografia na temat Zagłady: przegląd literatury i próba syntezy*, [in:] *Holokaust z perspektywy półwiecza. Pięćdziesiąta rocznica Powstania w Getcie Warszawskim. Materiały z konferencji zorganizowanej przez Żydow-*

the Holocaust resulted mainly from the fact that the official and binding interpretation of the wartime was only in its initial phase. Therefore, it was a period of active and private memory, not yet monopolised by ideological state discourse.

Undoubtedly, Jewish historians and their institutions published the most material about the Holocaust in postwar Poland. It is enough to say that one of the first institutions founded by the Holocaust survivors was the Central Jewish Historical Commission. It was established in August 1944 in the liberated Lublin, and its main task was documenting German crimes against Jews and obtaining accounts related to the Holocaust and preparing them for print. Between 1945 and 1946, the Central Jewish Historical Commission established regional offices in bigger cities while correspondents worked in smaller towns.¹⁴⁵ The Holocaust survivors, Natalia Aleksium writes, considered documenting and publicising the fate of Polish Jews during the war to be their obligation. Their sense of mission was additionally strengthened by the fear that otherwise the Holocaust would be forgotten or incorporated into the general history of Poland.¹⁴⁶ Their concerns and anticipations proved to be fully justified.

While Jewish historians initiated the process of registering and popularising knowledge of what had happened to Jews during the war, it was important for all Jews to maintain the memory of their deceased relatives and the Jewish community that used to live in Poland. Keeping these memories alive was a moral imperative for the Jewish survivors. Therefore, both individuals and institutions took steps to do so.¹⁴⁷ It was possible for Jewish historians to conduct research connected with documenting the Holocaust and to establish and run relevant institutions, because the first years after the war brought an atmosphere that was favourable for the Jewish minority.

Already in the Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation, the new Polish government promised to help Jews rebuild their lives, and to

ski Instytut Historyczny w dniach 29-31 marca 1993, D. Grinberg, P. Szapiro (red.), Warszawa 1993, p. 177-189; N. Aleksium, *Historiografia na temat Zagłady i stosunków polsko-żydowskich w okresie drugiej wojny światowej*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały" 2005, no 1, p. 32-52; J. Tomaszewski, *Historiografia polska o Zagładzie*, "Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego" 2000, no 2.

145 See: M. Horn, *Działalność naukowa i wydawnicza Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej przy CKŻPwP i Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego w Polsce w latach 1945-1950 (w czterdziestolecie powstania ŻIH)*, "Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego" 1985, no 1-2, p. 123-132.

146 See: N. Aleksium, *O konstruowaniu historii Żydów polskich*, [in:] PRL. *Trwanie i zmiana*, D. Stola, M. Zaremba (Eds.), Warszawa 2003, p. 338.

147 See: N. Aleksium, *O konstruowaniu...*, p. 333-349.

provide “legal and actual equality”.¹⁴⁸ Initially, there were favourable conditions in postwar Poland for the Jewish community to revive itself. Some historians even say that this was the time – although short – of Jewish national autonomy in Poland. Jews who decided to stay in Poland made a successful attempt to re-establish Jewish political parties and reconstruct Jewish education. The Central Committee of Polish Jews (Polish: *Centralny Komitet Żydów; CKŻP*) was also brought to life. It was intended to be a political representation of Jews in Poland and abroad and to coordinate aid and social security for the Holocaust survivors. The main statutory task of the Committee was the reconstruction of Jewish life in Poland.¹⁴⁹

In addition, Jewish Religious Congregations worked to organise Jewish religious life. Between 1945 and 1948, diverse cultural Jewish associations were in operation; the National Jewish Theatre functioned in Warsaw, and a publishing house, “*Dos Naje Lebn*”, was based in Lower Silesia. Jewish press and Jewish literature were published. The Jewish Press Agency delivered information about Jewish life in Poland and abroad. A Jewish cooperative was developing and administration jobs were available for Jews.¹⁵⁰

Where did this freedom to reanimate Jewish life and to self-organise result from? Why did the state guarantee it? Aleksander Smolar is undoubtedly right to note that this goodwill of the authorities, quite obvious at the beginning of the People’s Republic of Poland, should be interpreted as pragmatism rather than empathy.¹⁵¹ The authorities hoped for Jewish support and loyalty and, as a consequence, for the sympathy of the West, while some Jews believed that communism, based on the idea of internationalism and equality, would protect them from anti-Semitism. Therefore, Jewish support for communism did not always stem from love for the idea but also from pragmatic judgment of the situation and the balance of gains and losses. Jews hoped that a long life for communism would give them a chance to live their lives and provide them with a guarantee of safety. Hence, they supported and swelled the ranks of the communist government.¹⁵²

148 See: *Manifest PKWN*, Warszawa 1974, p. 20.

149 See: E. Hornowska, *Powrót Żydów polskich z ZSRR oraz działalność Centralnego Komitetu Żydów w Polsce*, “*Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*” 1985, no 1-2, p. 105-122.

150 See: A. Cała, H. Datner-Śpiewak, *Dzieje Żydów w Polsce 1944-1968. Teksty źródłowe*, Warszawa 1997, p. 75-86; 166-173; 221-240.

151 A. Smolar, *Tabu i niewinność*, op. cit., p. 62.

152 See: A. Grabski, *Działalność komunistów wśród Żydów w Polsce (1944-1949)*, Warszawa 2004.

As the authorities struggled with anti-Semitism and attempted to provide safety – a pressing need in the postwar years of anti-Semitic violence – Jews accepted their statements with satisfaction. The problem was, however, that governmental manifests against anti-Semitism were in fact directed at the state's political and ideological enemies. The authorities attempted to attach anti-Semitism to the Home Army (AK) and the National Armed Forces (NSZ), which they called the “reactionary forces”. Similarly, acts of violence, pogroms and murders of Jews were attached to the government-in-exile.¹⁵³

Clearly, the favourable attitude of the new government towards Jews was reflected in the social consciousness. The popular conviction that postwar Poland was ruled by Jews was confirmed, which strengthened and sanctioned the myth of Jewish communists (*żydokomuna*) based on the visibility of Jews in the new state administration and the Jewish approval of the new government. As a result, postwar communism was automatically linked to anti-Semitism.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the government did not need to make efforts to label their enemies as anti-Semites – that is in fact what they were. Anti-Semitism and the Jewish question were also skilfully used in later years but in the opposite way: the government discovered the utility of anti-Semitic rhetoric and made extensive use of it.

One of the events interpreted as a manifestation of the authorities' goodwill towards Jews was the unveiling of the Jewish Ghetto Memorial by Natan Rapaport and Leon Marek Suzin in Warsaw, on 19 April 1948.¹⁵⁵ The event was seen as honouring and giving preference to Jewish martyrdom at the expense of Polish martyrdom. There had been no monument in Warsaw devoted to the Warsaw Uprising until then, and the memory of the Home Army soldiers was systematically blotted out by labelling them as traitors to the nation. The Jewish Ghetto Memorial was for many years the only public place in Poland where all the national commemorations of the Holocaust were held.

The following months of 1948, however, brought about a significant change in the political strategy towards Jews. A symbolic manifestation of this change and an announcement of the new policy was the order to liquidate the Jewish exposition at the Recovered Territories Exhibition in Wrocław in the summer of

153 See: A. Grabski, G. Berendt, *Między emigracją a trwaniem. Syjoniści i komuniści żydowscy w Polsce po Holokaucie*, Warszawa 2003, p. 78-79.

154 Dariusz Stola observed an organic relationship between anti-Semitism, anti-communism and anti-Sovietism; see: D. Stola, *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce 1967-1968*, Warszawa 2000, p. 23.

155 See: J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press 1993, p. 155-185.

1948, and to move it into the Polish pavilion.¹⁵⁶ Alongside the increasing Stalinisation of the country, Jewish parties disappeared from the political scene. They were dissolved on the wave of the ideological offensive launched against the “right-wing and nationalist deviation” and Zionism. Manifests of these attitudes were found in Jewish parties and institutions. The campaign was aimed mostly at Jewish Zionists and the Bund (*General Jewish Labour Bund in Poland*) and it was run mostly by governmentally supported Jewish communists from the Faction of Polish Workers' Party, who dominated the Central Committee of Polish Jews. In 1948, its members declared their willingness to act “unanimously” and in 1949, after expelling the opposition and leaving Socialist International, the Bund merged with the Polish United Workers' Party. Additionally, the Ministry of Public Administration established deadlines for elimination of Zionist parties. As a result, at the beginning of 1950, there was no Jewish party in opposition to the Polish United Workers' Party.¹⁵⁷

The change of the official policy on Jews reached even further. All Jewish youth organisations directly or indirectly associated with political parties were liquidated. Jewish schools, hospitals, social security and worker cooperatives became nationalised. Jewish history was eliminated from the curriculum of Jewish schools. The Central Committee of Polish Jews was transformed into the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland, and became absolutely controlled by the state. It was the only Jewish organisation until 1989 to which *Związek Religijny Wyznania Mojżeszowego* (former Jewish Religious Congregations) was subordinated. As Alina Cała and Helena Datner-Śpiewak noted, “Jewish politics, defined as the representation of interests of diverse Jewish groups, ceased to exist.”¹⁵⁸

The Polish communist government policy relating to Jews from 1948-1953 followed, corresponded with and resulted from the actions undertaken by the Soviet Union and other countries of the Eastern Bloc. Starting from the end of the 1930s, Joseph Stalin was clearly planning an anti-Jewish crusade, and these tendencies intensified around 1948. Almost all Jewish institutions were liquidat-

156 See: B. Szaynok, *Walka z syjonizmem w Polsce (1948-1953)*, [in:] *Komunizm. Ideologia, system, ludzie*, T. Szarota (red.), Warszawa 2001, p. 260.

157 See: A. Cała, H. Datner-Śpiewak, op. cit., p. 84-90; A. Cała, *Mniejszość żydowska*, [in:] *Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce. Państwo i społeczeństwo polskie a mniejszości narodowe w okresach przełomów politycznych (1944-1989)*, P. Madajczyk (red.), Warszawa 1998, p. 263-270; L. Olejnik, *Polityka narodowościowa Polski w latach 1944-1960*, Łódź 2003, p. 398-416; A. Grabski, *Działalność komunistów...*, p. 256-301; B. Szaynok, *Z historią i Moskwą w tle. Polska a Izrael 1944-1968*, Warszawa 2007.

158 A. Cała, H. Datner-Śpiewak, op. cit., p. 89; See: także A. Grabski, *Działalność komunistów...*, p. 304-328.

ed in the Soviet Union. Numerous Jews were accused of an “international Trotskyite-Titoist-Zionist conspiracy”; they were brought to show trials, sentenced to death or sent to Gulags. Kremlin doctors of Jewish origin were also sent there, accused of contribution to the death of Żdanow and other state officials.¹⁵⁹ Similar things happened in other countries of the Eastern Bloc: in Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany or Czechoslovakia, where the secretary general of the communist party, Rudolf Slánský and several other activists of Jewish origin, were charged, sentenced and hanged in a show trial.¹⁶⁰

In comparison to other ‘satellite countries’, the Stalinist struggle with Jews was relatively soft and bloodless. It was limited to the liquidation of Jewish institutions and the dismissing of Jews from their political positions. On the other hand, there are reasons to believe that show trials and more brutal methods to deal with “the Jewish question” were also planned in Poland. Stalin’s death (5 March 1953), however, stopped the anti-Jewish campaign he had unleashed. Perhaps Jerzy Jedlicki was right to say that “it was very likely the war campaign of 1968 would have taken place in 1953. But then it would have had a much more brutal character.”¹⁶¹

The period of initial debates and first publications about the Holocaust in Poland was short. It lasted two to three years after the war. It was soon replaced with the need to deal with the difficult times of occupation and the even more disturbing memories. The attempts of Jewish historians to document and describe the Holocaust were limited after the end of Jewish national autonomy in Poland. Admittedly, the Jewish Historical Institute worked throughout the whole period of the People’s Republic of Poland but, as Feliks Tych noted, the knowledge of the Holocaust that had been gathered and publicised by Jewish historians never got through to the image of Polish history “spread by the most influential instruments of shaping historical awareness.”¹⁶² Besides, the Jewish Historical Institute was not always impregnable against ideological pressures.

This way or another, the Jewish Historical Institute was continuously at work and, from 1950 onwards, the Jewish Historical Institute Quarterly, a Polish-language academic periodical, was published. However, Dariusz Stola and Natalia Aleksion note that it was only an ostentatious gesture by the authorities to maintain this institution as well as keeping the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland and the Estera Kamińska Jewish Theatre in Warsaw. This ges-

159 See: J. Rapoport, *Sprawa lekarzy kremlofskich*, Warszawa 1990.

160 See: A. Lustiger, *Czerwona Księga. Stalin i Żydzi*, Warszawa 2004; Y. Gilboa, *The Black Years of Soviet Jewry 1939-1953*, Boston 1971; A. Vaksberg, *Stalin Against the Jews*, New York 1994.

161 J. Jedlicki, *Organizowanie nienawiści*, “Res Publica” 1988, no 4, p. 48.

162 F. Tych, *Długi cień Zagłady, Szkice historyczne*, Warszawa 1999, p. 75-76.

ture was intended to prove to the Western world that the communist government cared about Jewish culture and, in general, about Polish Jews. It also allowed the government to control and infiltrate the Jewish minority.¹⁶³

For long decades, the topic of Jews and the Holocaust was eliminated from public discourse and the pages of Polish history. If this subject ever appeared, it was falsified and deformed. Jews were only mentioned when they were used as scapegoats during periods of political crises and party reshuffling. So it was during the 1953 Polish Thaw in Poland when communists of Jewish origin were accused of the crimes of the Stalinist period, or in 1956, when “natolińczycy”, a faction of the communist party, struggled with “puławianie” (another faction) using anti-Semitic rhetoric. Jews were also made the scapegoats in March 1968 during an apparently anti-Zionist, but in fact anti-Semitic, campaign.

Silence on the subject of Jews and the Holocaust also resulted from the propagandist slogan about the ultimate national homogeneity of Poland. The reasons, however, were never analysed. There was no public discussion about Jews or other ethnic minorities who had lived in Poland before the war, or about the impoverishment of Polish culture and the emptiness of the ethnic landscape. This subject simply did not match the vision of an ethnically homogenous country that was promoted by the government.

Hence, the word “Jew” was continuously avoided. Sometimes it was replaced with various periphrases or allusions in order not to invoke the ghost and to affirm the conviction that the People’s Republic of Poland was an ethnically homogenous country. However, as Michał Głowiński points out, this silence and avoidance of the word “Jew” was a result of other factors. One of the reasons was the experience gained during the occupation period – the awareness of the danger of being a Jew and calling someone a Jew. Jews who decided to keep their false “Aryan” identity even after the war knew it very well. Another reason observed by Głowiński was the government’s desire not to be perceived as strangers, which was particularly true in the early postwar period. The discourse about Jews could have undermined the “familiarity” of the new government and its national character. Jews who were in power even changed their names to ones that sounded more Polish.¹⁶⁴

The silence about Jews and the Holocaust resulted also from the accepted and popularised communist historiography of the war. The government made national martyrdom, heroism and anti-fascism the fundament of the memory of the war. The memory of Polish heroes and victims became the superior memory.

163 See: B. Polak, *Wszyscy krawcy wyjechali...*, p. 21-22.

164 See: M. Głowiński, *Rosjanin, Niemiec, Żyd. O nazwach narodowości w PRL-owskim wystąpieniu*, [in:] *Komunizm. Ideologia...*, p. 24-26.

It corresponded with the national demand for commemorating heroism and suffering and it was the perfect cement for the collective identity of the nation. Its canonical version included acknowledging Poles as the main (if not the only) victims of the war and illustrating their heroic resistance against the Nazis. The Nazi victims of other nationalities were ignored, just as Stalin's victims from Poland were forced to subside into silence in the name of friendship with the Soviet Union. For various reasons, they were not suitable for the "political cult of the fallen" and the murdered. As Robert Traba noted, monopolisation of the war memory in the People's Republic of Poland concerned two dimensions: national and ideological; national, because the focus was only on the Polish nation's martyrdom, and ideological because the attention was given only to the suffering inflicted by the Nazi occupiers.¹⁶⁵ Anti-fascism was regarded as an attitude shared by all Poles during the war and as the "confession of faith" of every Polish citizen after the war. It also defined the Polish reason for state and legitimised communism as the only right antidote to fascism.

The authorities turned to the past to bond with the nation and to find sources for legitimising their power. War memory was abused, shaped according to needs and framed into an official and possibly cohesive version. The task was simple enough as the government took full control of the institutions that were responsible for memories of the war.¹⁶⁶ The government's aim was to polish national memory so that the nation could proudly look at it. This goal could only be achieved at the price of silence and reinterpretation. Some of these covering-up interventions, e.g. concerning Katyń and other events and persons, resulted from the need to legitimise power and were committed against the common memory. However, the silence and reinterpretation regarding Jews and the Holocaust were a response to the all-national need to forget and in this case, the official memory of the war met the social need.

Focusing only on Polish suffering and subjecting Polish historiography to such a perspective resulted in forgetting about the Holocaust. The forgetting had different forms and was manifested at different occasions.

First of all, the Holocaust was deprived of its uniqueness. The fact that its scenario and implementation involved almost exclusively Jews was silenced. In other words, the Holocaust was not regarded as a very specific event that required a very special attention.

Secondly, the difference between the occupational situation of Jews and Poles was blurred and the number of murdered Jews was counted together with

165 R. Traba, *Symbole...*, p. 60.

166 See: R. Traba, "Krajobraz po bitwie". *Polityczny kult poległych w Polsce po II wojnie światowej*, [in:] *Historia – przestrzeń dialogu*, Warszawa 2006, p. 125-133.

the number of Polish victims. Therefore, Jewish suffering was mixed into the Polish martyr vision of the occupation period, and the Holocaust – as a solely Jewish experience – was erased from the pages of Polish history. All of this was intended to lead to a perception of the Holocaust as something that had happened to Poles and the propagandistically exaggerated number of war victims was intended to intensify the sense of suffering and the immensity of war losses.

Thirdly, if the image of the history of the war was dominated by the vision of the martyred and heroic Polish nation, anything that could contradict this image was eliminated. Thus, indifferent and shameful attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust were silenced and the focus was on actions that could ease the national conscience and suppress moral anxiety. For this purpose, the Righteous Among the Nations were brought to public attention, while Jews were somehow made partly responsible for what had happened to them. They were admonished for their passivity, for lacking the “spirit of resistance” and for collaborating with the Nazis (e.g. *Judenräte*). Thus, the authorities attempted to unburden the conscience of the bystanders by making the victims accomplices. They also deliberately did not discuss the subject of the pre-war anti-Semitism but willingly presented evidence of the alleged Jewish anti-Polonism and their collaboration with the enemies of Poland.

Fourthly, if the subject of the Holocaust appeared at all, it was described and discussed through the lens of the accepted ideological interpretation of what had happened during the war and this was usually the reason to refer to it.¹⁶⁷

Different levels of the limited public discourse demonstrate that the process of forgetting the Holocaust indeed took place as one of the strategies of the official policy on war history. The evidence of this can be found in academic literature and fiction approved for publishing, in history and Polish language textbooks or articles in the official press. A specific historical policy to standardise monuments and memorials was implemented. For many years, it also embraced the anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, attaching new meanings and senses to it. What also required forgetting was the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 and earlier attempts to instrumentally use anti-Jewish resentments. In other words, the efforts to forget the Holocaust were many-sided and with the use of a whole spectrum of communication media and “carriers of historical memory.”¹⁶⁸ Let us now provide relevant examples.¹⁶⁹

167 See: A. Kichelewski, “Kwestia żydowska” w Polsce – władza i społeczeństwo wobec Żydów w latach 1945-1968, [in:] *Zagłada Żydów. Pamięć narodowa...*, p. 254-255.

168 The term has been borrowed from Marcin Kula’s book. See: M. Kula, *Nośniki pamięci historycznej*, Warszawa 2002.

169 These considerations have not been chronologically ordered and they are rather a case study. Only the events, episodes, fragments of public speeches and publications con-

4. A monument of martyrdom and the *encyclopaedists* case

The way the communist government presented and propagandistically used the former concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau is crucial proof of the covering up and repression of the memory of the Holocaust.¹⁷⁰ According to the prevailing research findings, this factory of death, built on Polish land, had claimed half a million human lives, of which 90% were Jews from Poland and other European countries. Poles and people of other nations also died in Auschwitz. The camp had two functions. From the very beginning, it was a concentration and labour camp where people worked beyond their normal capacities. After it was expanded in 1941, it also became an extermination camp. For the whole world, Auschwitz is the symbol of the Holocaust. In Poland however, the second stage of the history of Auschwitz, involving the extermination of Jews, was long left to neglect and oblivion, while the initial function of the camp, involving Polish martyrdom, is rarely discussed outside Poland. Why hasn't the important information about the second stage of the history of Auschwitz appeared in Polish collective consciousness?

The consciousness of contemporary Poles has not yet recovered from the effects of the communist propaganda that falsified the history, function, symbolism and meaning of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. For decades, Auschwitz was used for ideological purposes and the ways of using it reflected the political tendencies of the time. As Zdzisław Mach observed, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (Polish: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau) was subjected to successful attempts to “appropriate its symbol by the Polish communist government and make it an element of the ideological system which legitimised the political status quo.”¹⁷¹

Depending on the current need, the government gave the place different meanings. At the beginning, the state made the camp a symbol of anti-fascism

nected to the process of forgetting the Holocaust were chosen. These choices are undoubtedly incomplete and the considerations presented above do not exhaust the subject. They only present the most important manifestations of the process of forgetting the Holocaust between 1945 and 1989 and demonstrate that this process did in fact take place. The reader can find more detailed and competent analysis here: M. Steinlauf, *Pamięć nieprzyswojona. Polska pamięć Zagłady*, Warszawa 2001; I. Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland*, Transaction Books, New Jersey 1989.

170 On the subject of official memory policy involving former Nazi camps and the disputes about the memory of the camps in the first years after the war, see: Z. Wóycicka, *Przerwana żaloba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944-1950*, Warszawa 2009.

171 See: Z. Mach, Wstęp, [in:] *Europa po Auschwitz*, Z. Mach (Ed.), Kraków 1995, p. 10.

and hostility towards Germany. With time, as East Germany became one of the “satellite” countries and the Cold War divided the world in two, the anti-German blade of the symbolic meaning of Auschwitz was becoming blunt, but the camp was still used for propaganda against ideological enemies. Between the beginning of 1950s and the end of 1980s, it was the representation of various political manifestations: under the banner of anti-fascism, anti-imperialism or “the fight for peace”. The manifestations usually took place on the occasion of anniversaries of the outbreak of World War II or the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army (January 1945). These two anniversaries were never commemorated according to the historical calendar, but always in April, which was recognised by the government as the “month of national memory”.

Regardless of the meaning attached to Auschwitz or the purpose it served, it never ceased to symbolise Polish martyrdom. Certainly, there were periods of emphasising the universal significance of the place, as well as the internationalism and ethnic diversity of the victims. However, even then Poles occupied the leading position, while other nations were mentioned in Polish alphabetical order. Therefore, Jews were mentioned last. There was a consistent silence about the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the Jewish origin of the vast majority of the victims, condemned to death as a single ethnic group defined on the basis of the Nuremberg Laws.

Scholars agree that the origin of the “Polish-national commemorative idiom”¹⁷² and, at the same time, the symbolic process of “shoving Jews into oblivion”¹⁷³ began with the building of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. It was created from the initiative of the former inmates of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the inauguration ceremony was held on 14 June 1947, on the anniversary of the day when the first transport of inmates arrived in Auschwitz. The commemorations were dominated by the speeches of the state officials, with Józef Cyrankiewicz, the then prime minister and the former inmate of the camp, in the foreground.¹⁷⁴

However, the Museum was not legally sanctioned until 2 July 1947, by the Act of 2 July 1947, on the commemoration of martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Auschwitz. The name of the act itself suggests that “shoving Jews into oblivion” was a fact confirmed by the law. The content of the act proved as much in that it did not even mention Jews. The first press article labelled the former camp area as “the monument of martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations”. The care of the museum was given to the Polish Asso-

172 J. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration 1945-1979*, Ohio University Press, Ohio 2003, p. 147.

173 J. Ch. Szurek, *Między historią a pamięcią: polski świadek...*, p. 174.

174 See: J. Huener, op. cit., 32-33.

ciation of former political prisoners of German prisons and concentration camps, which was supported and controlled by the State.¹⁷⁵ State institutions also had a key role in shaping the symbolism of the former camp and the museum.

Thus, in the first years after the war, the basic symbolic meaning of Auschwitz was thus: it represented Polish suffering and the Polish struggle against the Fascists. This representation was obligatory and was reproduced in public discourse. There were also moments when state nationalism involving the Auschwitz Museum was supplemented by additional ideological ornaments dictated by the needs of the hour. Hence, alongside the developing Stalinisation and according to the demands of the Cold War, Auschwitz became a symbol of the fight against imperialism and ideological enemies, and the defence of peace, internationalism and the alliance with the Soviet Union.

After Stalin's death, the internationalist approach towards the symbolism of Auschwitz continued from 1953 to 1967. The museum was used to emphasise the significance of the alliance between "progressive countries" but also to point out the fact that Auschwitz had been the place of a crime against humanity. Humanity was conventionally represented by "national expositions" presented in the former prisoner blocks. Between 1960 and 1985, 14 such exhibitions were arranged and countries were responsible for expositions in their respective "national pavilions". The only exception was the Jewish pavilion, arranged by Polish government and international organisations. The first exhibition in the Jewish pavilion was closed right after opening, on the crest of the wave of the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968.¹⁷⁶

While the Act of 2 July 1947 only mentioned the martyrdom of other nations, the moment when the national diversity of the camp victims was actually emphasised was during the unveiling of the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism in Birkenau on 16 April 1967. Its erection was in honour of the internationalist approach to the area of the former camp, which was coming to an end as the process of nationalisation of Polish communism had been intensifying. The international Monument to the Victims of Fascism in Birkenau was situated near the ruins of the crematoria, that is, in the part of the camp which had been the main arena of the extermination of Jews. The central motif of the monument deserves special attention. Initially, according to the project, it was to be a cubist, figurative composition presenting three abstract figures: a woman, a man and a child. In the opinion of James E. Young, the figures were meant to

175 *Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947r. o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu* (Dz. U. no 52, poz. 265).

176 See: M. Kucia *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny*, Kraków 2005, p. 37-38; 248-249; T. Zbrzeska, *Z historią do milionów*, "Pro Memoria" 1997, no 7, p. 96-101.

symbolise Jews and it would be hard to disagree, as almost only Jews were killed with whole families and the three abstract figures probably represented a family. Additionally, “the different sizes of stones in the initial sculpture suggested children, who could not have been killed as political prisoners, but only as Jews.”¹⁷⁷ This motif however might have as well been a symbolised universalism of all the inmates: adults and children, women and men. However, just before unveiling it to the public, the monument was changed.¹⁷⁸ Instead of the three figures, a polished square of black marble appeared, divided into four parts that formed a cross with a triangle in the middle. The triangle in KL Auschwitz used to symbolise political inmates, thus the monument symbolised their death and suffering. It distinguished this group and made it a universal symbol of all the Auschwitz victims. Considering that Poles represented the majority of political inmates, one can say that Poles became the symbolic embodiment of all people who died or were murdered in Auschwitz. Unlike Poles, Jews were usually not registered at all because they were led directly to the gas chambers. If they ever had the “privilege” of registration and their death sentence was postponed, they were marked with the Star of David. The metaphorical language of the monument did not mention it and thus ignored the main victims of the camp.

The inscription also disregarded Jews. 19 plaques read in as many different languages: “Four million/ people suffered/ and died here/ at the hands/ of the Nazi/ murderers/ between the years/ 1940 and 1945.” Admittedly, two plaques included the text translated into Hebrew and Yiddish. However, another inscription, on the main plaque, next to the “Cross of Grunewald” and below the triangle, was only in Polish and its text also disregarded Jews. It read: “The Council of State of the People’s Republic of Poland awarded the “Heroes of Auschwitz, who suffered death here/ fighting against the Nazi genocide/ for freedom and human dignity/ for peace and brotherhood of nations” with the First Class Order of the Cross of Grunewald.”¹⁷⁹

The Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, who participated in the unveiling ceremony of the monument along with the Minister of the Interior Mieczysław Moczar, Deputy Minister for Culture Kazimierz Rusinek and other state dignitaries, also said nothing about Jews. In his long speech, the Prime Minister listed

177 J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven and London 1993, p. 139-141.

178 James E. Young notes “While some snapshots show evidence that the figures did stand as planned for one week, just before the dedication itself, the carved stones were replaced by a polished square of black marble with a triangle in the middle, with no official explanation for this change to this day.” See: J. E. Young, op. cit., p. 141.

179 Citation after B. Lessaer, *Auschwitz jako rzeczywistość przedstawiona*, “Bez Dogmatu” 1996, no 30, p. 12.

many nationalities of the camp victims, but the Jewish one he consistently omitted.¹⁸⁰ His speech provoked outrage from Robert Weiss, the chairman of the International Auschwitz Committee, and not only him. The context of these events inspired Michał Borwicz to write and disseminate in France a small brochure titled: “Les chambres à gaz déjudaïsées” (The de-Jewified Gas Chambers)¹⁸¹.

Both monument inscriptions need a commentary as they included false, propagandist presumptions, which existed and were spread almost till the end of the People’s Republic of Poland, and their effects on the social consciousness of Poles have been significant.

First, the inscriptions included clear untruth – the number of victims was overestimated. The number of 4 million victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau, considered to be valid, was disseminated in all the countries of the Soviet Bloc and it was disproved only in the late 1980s. Additionally, the plaques in 19 different languages were intended to suggest that the 4 million victims were people of different nationalities. The problem was that nationality of the victims was equated with their citizenship and no attention was paid to the fact that the vast majority of these people had died because they had been Jewish, not French, Greek or Hungarian. Clearly, such a manoeuvre served propagandist purposes. It well suited the internalisation of the symbolic meaning of Auschwitz as the International Monument of the Victims of Fascism.¹⁸² However, the truth of the main victims of Auschwitz, sentenced to death because of their origin, was diluted and falsified.

The overestimated number of the victims implied that the number of murdered Poles was also higher. This, however, did not matter much; a more important fact was that the number of murdered Jews was included in the register of Polish victims. The figure of 6 million Poles murdered during the war, which was disseminated by the communist government, is the best evidence. Of course, the Polish Jews *were* Polish citizens. However, counting them as Polish victims was dictated by the desire to magnify the enormity of Polish martyrdom and led to the process of blurring the singular horror of the Holocaust.

The inscription carved on the main plaque of the monument highlighted the heroism of the victims and only mentions the heroes of the camp resistance movement – mostly communists and socialists. Therefore, it completely disregarded Jews and other victims who occasionally fought for dignity, but mainly

180 For more on the speech of the Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz and generally on the monument unveiling ceremony, see: J. Huener, op. cit., p. 165.

181 The brochure was mentioned by Jean-Charles Szurek. See: J. Ch. Szurek, *Między historią a pamięcią: polski świadek...*, p. 177.

182 See: Z. Mach, *Czym jest Auschwitz dla Polaków?*, [in:] Y. Doosry (ed.), *Representations of Auschwitz*, Kraków 1995, p. 21.

for survival. Victims of the gas chambers, Stanisław Krajewski aptly observes, did not fight for anything, even for survival, because they did not even have a chance to do so. The inscription on the monument, which was situated next to the crematoria, completely ignored them – although Jews were the ones who deserved commemoration in this special place. According to Krajewski, the inscription would make sense only if “it regarded only the members of the camp resistance movement – not all the victims of gas chambers”. Napis w zaproponowanym brzmieniu miałby zdaniem Krajewskiego sens jedynie wówczas, gdyby założyć, “że mowa jest nie o zagazowanych, nie o wszystkich ofiarach, ale wyłącznie o uczestnikach obozowego ruchu oporu”¹⁸³.

The communist interpretation of the history of KL Auschwitz-Birkenau (Polish: *Oświęcim-Brzezinka*) was binding almost to the end of the People’s Republic of Poland. Regardless of the attempts to attach the symbol of heroism and martyrdom of many nations to this place, in Poland, Auschwitz symbolised the heroism and martyrdom of Poles¹⁸⁴ and, only later, of other nations. It definitely was not interpreted as the symbol of the extermination of Jews as an ethnic group sentenced to annihilation by the Nazis – this historical fact had been shrouded in a veil of silence. In other words, as Tomasz Goban-Klas notes, by saying “Four million people suffered and died here”, the authorities covered up the truth: the fact that the majority of the victims, nine out of each ten, were Jews.¹⁸⁵

Considering what has been already said, the campaign launched in 1967 against *encyclopaedists* should not surprise anyone: it was simply a consequence of the tendencies to glorify Polish martyrdom and to forget about the Holocaust. It was also an element of the whole “anti-Zionist” campaign, which was at its most intensive in 1968, but started about two months after the unveiling of the Monument to the Victims of Fascism in Birkenau.

The first signals of the attack on the *encyclopaedists*, that is, the members of the editorial staff of the Great Universal Encyclopaedia (WEP) by the State Academic Publishing House (PWN), were already evident in June 1967.¹⁸⁶ Veterans associated with the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (ZBoWiD) discussed the article titled “Hitlerite concentration camps” (*Obozy*

183 S. Krajewski, *Żydzi, Judaizm, Polska*, Warszawa 1997, p. 241.

184 See: S. Kaprański, *Oświęcim – miejsce wielu pamięci*, “Pro Memoria” 8 I 1998, p. 21.

185 T. Goban-Klas, *Pamięć podzielona, pamięć urażona: Oświęcim i Auschwitz*, [in:] *Euro po...*, p. 72.

186 It is important to note that the government’s first attempts to deal with the State Academic Publishing House were between 1964 and 1965 and ended in the dismissal of the chief editor, Adam Bromberg. The “encyclopaedists’ case, however, started only in 1967. See: J. Eisler, *Marzec 1968*, Warszawa 1991, p. 340-341.

koncentracyjne hitlerowskie), printed in Volume 8 in 1966. The authors of the article, in accordance with the facts and the new terminology used in the literature of the subject, made a reasonable distinction between concentration camps and extermination camps. In other words, they differentiated between camps where, despite murderous work and hopeless sanitation, there was some chance of survival and camps that were designed for industrial killing (e.g. Treblinka, Chełmno, Breslau, Belzec, Sobibór). The authors' main offence was that they dared to note that death camps were installed only on occupied Polish soil and that the number of their victims was approximately "5.7 million, including 99 % Jews, app. 1% Gypsies and others."¹⁸⁷

This article had been discussed by the veterans from ZBoWiD since June 1967 and the members of PWN editorial staff were accused of depreciating Polish martyrdom and of pro-Israel sympathies, which, after the Six-Day War, corresponded with the anti-Semitic campaign in Poland.¹⁸⁸ However, the accusation that initiated the campaign against the *encyclopaedists* was formed by the Ministry of the Interior and the head of the department, Mieczysław Moczar, who may be regarded as its 'godfather'. Members of the communist party allied to Moczar constituted a faction called 'partisans'. Most of the 'partisans' were veterans of the Communist anti-Nazi underground and they shared a love of military traditions. Their outlook was a type of nationalism expressed by the language of the communist doctrine. It included anti-Semitism, dislike of everything that was not Polish and an aversion towards any manifestations of cultural liberalisation.

The position of Mieczysław Moczar was not only the result of his control over the Ministry of the Interior, but also over institutions responsible for the public memory of the war: the aforementioned ZBoWiD, which he headed, the International Auschwitz Committee and the Central Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland. All of these institutions were dominated by people devoted to Moczar.¹⁸⁹ Moczar presented himself as a war hero. Hundreds of thousands of copies of his autobiographic book, "Barwy walki" ("Colours of Combat"), in which he described his war experience, were published in the 1960s. It was obligatory reading for high school students; it has also been trans-

187 The article: "obozy koncentracyjne hitlerowskie" [in:] *Wielka Encyklopedia Powszechna*, Warszawa 1966, t. 8, p. 87-89. See: także P. Skwieceński, *Encyklopedyści '68*, "Res Publica" 1999, no 1, p. 78.

188 See: P. Skwieceński, op. cit., p. 77; P. Osęka, *Encyklopedyści*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 6-7 III 1998, p. 30.

189 See: K. Lesiakowski, *Mieczysław Moczar "Mietek". Biografia polityczna*, Warszawa 1998.

lated into several languages and made into a film.¹⁹⁰ Without going into details of the phenomena of the popularity of Mieczysław Moczar and his *partisans*, it is enough to say that their environment felt predestined to fulfil the role of the guards of the official memory of World War II. This memory was based on martyred and heroic motifs and presented Poles as the nation that endured the greatest pain, suffered the greatest number of deaths and displayed the greatest bravery. *Partisans* were determined to defend such an image and not to let anyone belittle or defame it.

Coming back to the *encyclopaedists* case: on July 17, 1967, the Ministry of the Interior sent an “Information about the mistakes found in the Great Universal Encyclopaedia” to the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party and the Ministry of Justice. In their letter, the Ministry noted that “the content of the article is similar to the propagandist reasoning of Zionist groups and Western nationalists.” They also made charges relating to the prevailing historiography, which had allegedly researched the murders of Jews rather than Poles.¹⁹¹ Most importantly, the editorial board members were accused of the “unjustified” distinction between concentration camps and extermination camps and of giving the figure of 5.7 million Jews killed in the latter (99% of all the deceased). Secondly, the article lacked the figures for Poles who had died or been murdered in camps, which allegedly implied that only Jews had died in German camps. Thirdly, the editors were accused of providing the information that all death camps had been located “on Polish soil”, thus accusing Poles of complicity in the Holocaust.¹⁹²

In other words, as Marcin Zaremba rightly observed, “the authors’ crime was to question the stereotype” that Poles had suffered the most during the war, they were the “Christ of Nations” and they should yield their victory palm of martyrdom.”¹⁹³

By violating one of the fundamentals of national Messianism and unconsciously getting involved in rivalry for the precedence in suffering, the editors of the Great Universal Encyclopaedia exposed themselves to the negative response of the authorities. At the end of July 1967, a special commission of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party was appointed. Its task was to explain the crime committed by the PWN editors. A separate investigation was

190 See: M. Moczar, *Barwy walki*, Warszawa 1961; Film adaptation with the same title, directed by Jerzy Passendorfer, had its premiere in 1964.

191 Citation after: P. Osęka, M. Zaremba, *Wojna po wojnie, czyli polskie reperkusje wojny sześciodniowej*, [in:] *Polska 1944/45-1989. Studia i materiały*, Warszawa 1999, p. 231.

192 See: P. Osęka, *Encyklopedyści...*, p. 30.

193 M. Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*, Warszawa 2001, p. 332.

also conducted by the Regional Prosecutor's Office in Warsaw and the "party group of the V Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" carefully analysed the content of the VIII volume of the encyclopaedia.¹⁹⁴ At the same time, the press started a campaign against the *encyclopaedists*, initiated by Władysław Machejk's article *Smutno mi Boże... (I'm sad, God: the title of a famous Polish poem by Juliusz Słowacki)* in the weekly publication, "Życie Literackie".¹⁹⁵

The commission finished their investigation in mid-October 1967. As a result of their decision, Leon Marszałek, the chief editor of the Encyclopaedias and Dictionaries Team, was officially reprimanded, but none of the employees were dismissed.¹⁹⁶ The commission was satisfied with highlighting "the lack of political sensitivity of the editorial board" and recommending the creation of a proper supplement to the VIII volume that would correct the existing "distortions". Considering the intensity of the campaign launched against the *encyclopaedists* and the circumstances of the case, it was an "extraordinarily gentle move", Piotr Osęka comments.¹⁹⁷ This move, however, was also only temporary. In 1968, on the crest of the wave of the anti-Semitic campaign, the case of the *encyclopaedists* was reopened. This time the investigation was pursued under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and its task was to "examine the entire situation regarding the personnel of the State Academic Publishing House (PWN)."¹⁹⁸ The press campaign against the *encyclopaedists* was initiated by Tadeusz Kur in "Prawo i Życie" weekly.¹⁹⁹

Alongside the work of the commission and the accusatory press articles, all the prior charges against the editorial board were repeated and the list was even extended. Their common denominator was that the editors devoted too much space to Jewish martyrdom and Jews in general and too little to Poles and their suffering. The responsibility for this matter was attributed to the Jews employed by PWN, whose names were revealed with alacrity. In this way, the authorities found a way to deal with the ideological enemies they had been trying to seize for some time.²⁰⁰

194 Citation after P. Osęka, *Encyklopedyści...*, p. 31.

195 See: W. Machejek, *Smutno mi Boże...*, "Życie Literackie" 6 VIII 1967, p. 16.

196 P. Osęka, *Encyklopedyści...*, op. cit., p. 31.

197 Ibidem.

198 P. Osęka, *Encyklopedyści...*, p. 32.

199 See: T. Kur [Witold Jerzmanowski], *Encyklopedyści*, "Prawo i Życie" 24 III 1968, p. 1,3; Citation after P. Osęka, *Syjniści, inspiratorzy, wicherzyciele. Obraz wroga w propagandzie marca 1968*, Warszawa 1999, p. 174.

200 See: D. Stola, *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce 1967-1968*, Warszawa 2000 p. 63-64. See: P. Osęka, M. Zaremba, op. cit., p. 231-232.

As a consequence, on 6 April 1968, the Encyclopaedias and Dictionaries Team made an official statement, which in fact was a self-criticism and an admission of their error. The very same day, the Fundamental Party Organisation of PWN also adopted a self-critical resolution and applied to dissolve the editorial team of the Great Universal Encyclopaedia, which indeed took place two days later. In addition, the ministerial commission dismissed 37 PWN employees.²⁰¹

In the name of atonement for the crime, the new editorial staff of the State Academic Publishing House prepared a special supplement attached to the XI volume. Subscribers were advised to insert it in place of the controversial article “Hitlerite concentration camps” published in the VIII volume. The editorial note in the supplement stated that in the previous article “the image of the martyrdom of the Polish nation and Polish citizens of different nationality was distorted” and that “the proportion of the losses (...) in Polish society during the World War II was the greatest in comparison to other countries of the anti-Hitler coalition.” The corrected article did not include the distinction between concentration camps and death camps. Instead, it informed that “H. C. [Hitlerite camps: author’s note] served to implement the programme of biol. [biological: author’s note] extermination of the Polish nation (...) they were also a tool of the planned extermination of Jewish people.”²⁰² Therefore, according to this logic, all these camps were first of all intended to murder Poles, and only afterwards “also” Jews” and other nationalities.

The case of *encyclopaedists* is a striking example of one of the struggles in the Polish-Jewish rivalry for the precedence in suffering – which in fact was not a real rivalry because after the Holocaust there was no one left in Poland to compete with. Therefore, this case demonstrates how the memory of the Holocaust was eliminated and how it was erased from the pages of Polish history. The campaign against the *encyclopaedists* was also an element of the spectrum of events that are usually referred to as ‘March 1968’, and the accusations against the *encyclopaedists* corresponded with the whole idea of ‘March talk’.²⁰³

201 See: P. Skwieciński, op. cit., p. 83; P. Osęka, *Encyklopedyści...*, p. 32.

202 Citation after J. R. Krzyżanowski, op. cit., p. 194.

203 This phrase has been borrowed from Michał Głowiński’s book. See: M. Głowiński, *Marcowe gadanie. Komentarze do słów 1966-1971*, Warszawa 1991.

5. March exorcisms on the Holocaust

There is no single answer to the question of what March '68 was. The events under this name may or even must be analysed on different levels.²⁰⁴ After 1956, March was another conflict over power within the communist party and a confrontation between government and society. To quote Adam Michnik: "There were two main scenes of March 1968. One may say: like in Homer's literature, in which the conflict of Gods was intertwined with the human war, the March conflict within the power apparatus intertwined with people's fight for freedom."²⁰⁵

Thus, March events involved Mieczysław Moczar, "partisans" and their adherents, as well as the students' rebellion at the Warsaw University. They also involved an attempt of the government to establish contact with the general populace. The prevailing language of the communist doctrine was abandoned in favour of a language that spoke more to people's needs and, most of all, was full of emotions and resentments, with anti-Semitism at the top. It referred to the "national-undemocratic heritage", Aleksander Smolar wrote, e.g. to the tradition of the National Radical Camp which Adam Michnik clearly suggested.

March '68 was a far-flung attempt to invite the general populace to the game. Never before had the government approached the people so directly and with such a flourish, using all available media. The image of the enemy, which emerged from the intensive propagandist campaign, included: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Cardinal Archbishop Stefan Wyszyński, the Komandosi group ("The Commandos": a famous group of students from the anti-Communist opposition), West Germany, and, most of all, Jews.²⁰⁶ March was a public eruption of state anti-Semitism and an anti-Semitic campaign which, in postwar Europe, were nowhere else to be found on such a scale. Considering its rhetoric and actions, the campaign was a reflection of two seemingly opposing traditions, or perhaps their peculiar hybrid: the tradition of anti-Semitic nationalism and the heritage of the Stalinist campaigns of hate. The March campaign adopted the anti-Semitic clichés and slogans of the interwar period ("the key to the national heritage of anti-Jewish prejudice"²⁰⁷) while previous communist campaigns provided not only mottos, catchwords

204 For more on the events named March 1968, see: L. Cooper, *In the Shadow of Polish Eagle. The Poles, the Holocaust and Beyond*, Palgrave New York 2000, p. 206-224.

205 A. Michnik, *Sakrament byka*, "Krytyka. Kwartalnik Polityczny" 1988, no 28-29, p. 24-25.

206 See: M. Głowiński, *Nowomowa po polsku*, Warszawa 1990, p. 63-68.

207 This phrase was used by Dariusz Stola. See: D. Stola, op. cit., p. 148.

and “enemy models” but also ready-made patterns of conduct for individuals and institutions.²⁰⁸

Clearly, the anti-Semitic campaign, as well as other events termed ‘March ‘68’, were not limited to one month or even one year. The symbolism and conventionality of the term seem obvious. March was a culmination of the prevailing tendencies and processes and its consequences were perceptible for years. In other words, it was rooted in the past and influenced the future. It is important to consider it in the context of the anti-Semitic campaign, which did intensify in the spring of 1968, but had already started in 1967 after the Six-Day War, which was won by Israel. In addition, March ‘68 had not been the first time that the government openly used anti-Semitic rhetoric. It had already happened in 1956 during the crisis in the Polish United Workers' Party.²⁰⁹ However, while Jews were then accused of having co-created and supported the system in its Stalinist version, in 1968 they were accused of contesting it.

If we attempted to generalise and compare these two cases of an instrumental use of anti-Semitism, we may come to conclusion that they both took place in moments of political crisis.

During the anti-Semitic campaign, symbolically inaugurated by Władysław Gomułka's speech of 1967, when he said his famous words about a “fifth column” operating in Poland, no one openly said anything about who was this campaign's target.²¹⁰ The sad and obvious truth was camouflaged by speaking of “Zionists”. There is no doubt, however, that in fact it was about Jews and those who were recognised as Jews by the government. This semantic manipulation was a protective shield against accusations of anti-Semitism, which did not fit the idea of internationalism. The concealment was however superficial enough to be comprehensible. Even if the meaning of the word “Zionism” and “Zionist” was not known for all Poles, which the famous transparent “Zionist to Siam!” [in Polish, two words are homonyms] clearly demonstrated, the majority must have intuitively guessed that “Zionist” in fact meant “Jew”. It was a very comfortable substitution: “everyone knew what and who it was about but nothing was called by its real name.”²¹¹

As has been already said, the main forum of the anti-Semitic campaign organised under the auspices of the state was the press, and its main weapons were words.

208 See: D. Stola, op. cit., p. 148-149; J. Jedlicki, *Organizowanie nienawiści...*, p. 64-65.

209 See: P. Machcewicz, *Polski rok 1956*, Warszawa 1993, p. 216-234.

210 See: D. Stola, op. cit., p. 40-41.

211 J. Jedlicki, *Organizowanie nienawiści*, [in:] *Żłe urodzeni czyli o doświadczeniu historycznym. Scripta i postscripta*, Londyn – Warszawa 1993, p. 62.

Thus, Dariusz Stola's words were not unjustified when he described the "anti-Semitic trend of March 1968" by "a symbolic or verbal pogrom", whose culmination was not "bloody terror, but mental terror, not a wave of arrests and deportations to Siberia, but a wave of layoffs and emigrations."²¹² Jerzy Jedlicki also draws attention to this fact, and the observations of both scholars are confirmed by the content of the press articles of the time. They are confirmed by the anti-Semitic speeches during many rallies, organised at workplaces, but not only there. They are confirmed by purges of the army and layoffs on the basis of criteria derived from the Nuremberg Laws.²¹³ Finally, they are confirmed by the last wave of Jewish emigration from Poland.²¹⁴ Victims of March talked about this "bloodless pogrom" and the dilemmas that accompanied them in interviews and memoirs many years later,²¹⁵ naming them, not without a reason, "a March shock".²¹⁶

An attempt to provide a comprehensive description of all the elements of this "anti-Zionist" but in fact anti-Semitic campaign in Poland between 1967 and 1968 would require a great deal more time and space than we have at our disposal. Even the analysis of the press, anti-Zionist rhetoric and the panorama of roles attached to Jews in the March scenario is a separate topic. For the purpose of this book, there is no need for a detailed reconstruction of the "anti-Zionist campaign". Instead, attention should be paid to the elements of the campaign that significantly concerned Polish memory of the Holocaust.²¹⁷

As Michael Steinlauf rightly observed, the last years of the 1960s, that is, the period of the anti-Semitic campaign, may be viewed as "an attempted exorcism of the worst demons of Polish national memory."²¹⁸ Similarly to other scholars, Steinlauf states that the campaign "referred to the suppressed guilt which had been festering in the Polish subconscious."²¹⁹ The guilt and discomfort was related to the attitude of Poles towards the Holocaust.

212 D. Stola, op. cit., p. 149-150.

213 See: T. Pióro, *Czystki w Wojsku Polskim 1967-1968*, Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego 1997, no 2, p. 59-76.

214 According to various data, the anti-Semitic campaign resulted in 12,000 to 20,000 Polish Jews leaving Poland.

215 See: J. Wiszniewicz, *Z Polski do Izraela. Rozmowy z pokoleniem '68*, Warszawa 1992; J. Wiszniewicz, *Życie przecięte. Opowieści pokolenia Marca*, Wołowiec 2008; A. Mieszczanek (Ed.), *Krajobraz po szoku*, Warszawa 1989.

216 See: P. Śpiewak (Ed.), *Szok marcowy: przegląd prasy*, Warszawa 1998.

217 See: J. Leociak, *Instrumentalizacja Zagłady w dyskursie marcowym*, "Kwartalnik Historii Żydów" 2008, no 4, p. 447-458.

218 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage...*, p. 88.

219 M. Steinlauf, *Pamięć nieprzyswojona...*, p. 104-105.

As has been already mentioned, March rhetoric was an attempt to establish contact with the general populace. It is easy to notice that one of the methods employed to this end was to refer to the memory of the occupation. This memory, rooted in the heroic-martyred mythology of the oppressed nation, had been the key element of building national identity, and referring to it was nothing new. Before 1968, however, the topic of Jews and their war experience had been silenced. Jews, the Holocaust, and, in particular, Polish attitudes to the Holocaust, had been a taboo, one that belonged to the sphere of embarrassment and silence. Perhaps March '68 was a possibility to deal with the subject and to fill the silence gap. As Michał Głowiński noted, it was an attempt to "find a language to lie about it rather than to speak."²²⁰ Instead of truth and historical facts about the Holocaust, the discourse of March '68 presented an official, narrative palimpsest, which had therapeutic power and the ability to anaesthetise the difficult past. Referring to Krystyna Kersten's words, one may say that this "construct", made of half-truths, was "intended to replace the truth of the reality that was too difficult to face."²²¹ This construct could bring relief to anyone whose subconscious was nagged by discomfort related to their role as a passive bystander, beneficiary or sometimes even accomplice of the Holocaust. It did not, however, disturb the martyred and heroic memory of the war. On the contrary, it even made such thinking more reasonable.

The most important news delivered by the March orators was the conspiracy against Poland and the Polish nation, the aim of which was to assign responsibility for the Holocaust to Poles and to label them as a nation contaminated with organic anti-Semitism. The conspiracy was allegedly organised by "Zionists", that is, Jews – Polish citizens, Israeli Jews and the Jewish diaspora in the world – and West Germany; in other words: by the victims and the executioners. This elementary plot of the March narrative was developed by dignitaries from the communist party, by writers, and, in particular, by journalists.²²²

In his speech of 1 May, Władysław Gomułka referred to a "dirty, anti-Polish, Zionist campaign."²²³ The goal of this campaign was specified by Tadeusz Walichnowski, one of the leading mentors of March '68, whose book was titled "Izrael a NRF" ["Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany"] and became a real bestseller: in one and a half years, five Polish editions and eight foreign translations were published.²²⁴ In his book, Walichnowski reported that

220 M. Głowiński, *Pismak 1863 i inne szkice o różnych brzydkich rzeczach*, Warszawa 1995, p. 64.

221 K. Kersten, op. cit., p. 150.

222 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage...*, p.85.

223 Citation after M. Głowiński, *Pismak 1863...*, p. 67.

224 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage...*, p.85

“The aim of the Zionist campaign is to draw the world’s attention away from the Nazi crimes against Jews by making the Polish nation co-responsible for these crimes.”²²⁵

Walichnowski’s thought was popularised by the press, who published information about a campaign of slander against Poland, the goal of which was to make Poles co-responsible for the Jewish tortures and to thus to unburden West Germany from their responsibility for the Holocaust. This theory was supposedly confirmed by publications and cited statements from the Western press as well as some literary works, such as Jerzy Kosinski’s *Painted Bird*, Leon Uris’ *Exodus* and *Mila 18* or Jean Francois Steiner’s *Treblinka*. According to people referring to these publications, all of them assigned at least approval and passivity (if not complicity) towards the Holocaust to Poles and accused them of anti-Semitism.²²⁶ They thus confirmed the conspiracy theory.

According to the discourse of March ‘68, the conspiracy against Poland was organised by Jews (“Zionists”) and West German “revanchists”, or simply Israel and West Germany. Therefore, it was seen as an unprecedented alliance of the victims and executioners from which both sides would benefit. Germans were believed to have Jewish support in diluting their crimes and responsibility for the Holocaust while Jews supposedly hoped to receive high war reparations. This theory was additionally supported by the stereotype of Jewish conspiracy, disseminated by “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. What also made it seem more reliable was the memory of World War II and the axiom about German hostility towards Poland, repeated by propaganda for years. What made this situation different was that two enemies of the Polish nation had allegedly decided to join forces to Poland’s detriment.

In addition, some events from the past were seen as verification of the alliance of Jews and Germans and provided the answer to the question: how long did this “breeding season”²²⁷ last? In particular, World War II was seen as proof of the Jewish-German collaboration. The press mentioned the complicity in the Holocaust of the *Judenräte* and the Jewish police in ghettos. In other words, the press suggested that Jews had contributed to the extermination of their own nation and that present events only proved and updated this theory. The extreme version of the collaboration theory suggested a correlation between the Jews and the Nazis. In one of his radio speeches, Kazimierz Rusinek, the Deputy Minister

225 T. Walichnowski, *Izrael a NOF*, Warszawa 1968, p. 165.

226 See: P. Lendvai, *Ant-Semitism without Jews*, Doubleday 1971, p.187; See: także T. Walichnowski, *Izrael a NOF...*, p. 164-193.

227 This term was used by W. Machejek in his article titled: *Izrael a NOF* published in “Życie Literackie” (11 II 1968). Citation after M. Głowiński, *Pismak 1863...*, p. 84.

of Culture at the time and an activist of ZBOWiD, said: “it is no secret that many Hitlerite criminals are in the service of the Israel army”.²²⁸ Piotr Goszczyński, a “Głos Robotniczy” journalist, noted that the Israeli Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, was in fact Otto Skorzeny, “the well known specialist in murder from Uncle Adolf’s SS”.²²⁹ A “Kultura” journalist suggested that Yael Dajan, Mosze Dajan’s daughter (and a famous writer) resembled “the notorious Ilse Koch”, a “Nazi war criminal, who had lampshades made of the skin of murdered Jews”.²³⁰

The Six-Day War was another event that supposedly confirmed the alliance of victims and executioners and the affinity between Jews and Germans. The context of the war was used to point out the analogies between the “Zionists” and the Nazis. Thus, the press reported that both Nazi Germany and Israel were carrying out imperial policy. Israel, like Germany before, introduced racial criteria and did not avoid openly discriminatory practices in its domestic policy²³¹; it was also the oppressor and aggressor against the Palestinian and Arab nations. These similarities were deliberately suggested by the press, who portrayed the Six-Day War as a “Blitzkrieg”, the Israeli army as occupiers, and the Jewish-German pact as the “Bonn – Tel-Aviv Axis”.²³²

Therefore, the press deliberately used very specific language, which Poles automatically associated with the period of the Nazi occupation. As a result, the image of Israelis was to “overlap with the image of the Nazis” or even “both images [should] be considered the same”.²³³ Sometimes, the Israeli army was openly called “Nazis” and accused of genocide.

Moshe Dayan became the embodiment of all evil. Dayan was compared to Adolf Hitler, and the Israeli army he led was called “Dayan’s cohorts”.²³⁴ The World Zionist Congress was described as more nationalist and racist than the Nazi Party, proud of the Nuremberg laws.²³⁵ The fact that the Israeli army had been trained by German experts and was supposed to be the evidence of the collaboration between the two nations. March orators warned against this alliance of “two militarisms” as particularly dangerous for Poland.²³⁶

228 P. Lendvai, op. cit. p. 149.

229 Ibidem, p. 59.

230 Ibidem, p.159.

231 Ibidem, p.187-194.

232 See: M. Głowiński, *Marcowe gadanie...*, p. 29, 152.

233 See: M. Głowiński, *Marcowe gadanie...*, p. 105.

234 See: M. Głowiński, *Marcowe gadanie...*, p. 17, 20, 102, 152,

235 Citation after P. Lendvai, op. cit., p. 167.

236 Citation after M. Głowiński, *Marcowe gadanie...*, p. 158.

All the events and discourse from the March plot were doubtlessly intended to demonstrate the affinity and closeness between Jews and Germans or the “German-Jewish fraternity.”²³⁷ One should not forget, however, that the prime purpose of this Jewish-German alliance was to pin the co-responsibility for the Holocaust on Poles and stigmatise them as eternal anti-Semites. Thus, the goal of the alleged conspiracy against Poland was to disseminate a version of World War II history in which Poles contributed significantly to the Holocaust and are anti-Semites. In other words, this aim of the conspiracy (or, “the Zionist anti-Polish high jinks”²³⁸), that is, the imagined coalition of victims and oppressors, was the main element of the structure of the March plot. It was against this campaign that the Polish United Workers' Party came out and defended the good name of the nation from the calumnies to which it was subjected. By identifying “Zionism” with anti-communism and, most of all, anti-Polonism, dignitaries and propagandists ostentatiously manifested themselves as the defenders of the nation.²³⁹

Obviously, the defence was mostly organised by the attack against “Zionists” (Jews) and all those who were intended to be socially perceived as their allies. It was a campaign of hateful words, but also openly anti-Semitic deeds, presented as a justified defence. The more eagerly the vilified nation was defended, the more accusations were levelled at Jews and the more sophisticated they became; the more decisive the actions and the more credible the conspiracy. One can see here the classic echo effect: the more aggressive and evident the official Polish anti-Semitism, the more was written and said about it abroad. And if more was written and said about it, the conspiracy theory about the anti-Semitic label attached to Poles was confirmed and strengthened.

Only the proponents of the conspiracy theory benefitted from this vicious circle because their elucubrations only gained credibility. It is enough to say that Paweł Jasienica's speech, apparently giving credence to the anti-Polish conspiracy and warning against the consequences of the “world's belief that we are a nation of anti-Semites” was greeted with a long ovation during the general assembly of the Warsaw department of the Union of Polish Writers.²⁴⁰

237 See: M. Głowiński, *Marcowe gadanie...*, p. 225-226.

238 M. Głowiński, *Marcowe gadanie...*, p. 107.

239 In his analysis of the influence of national ideology on political reality in communist Poland, Krzysztof Tyszka noted that in March there were attempts to prove that Zionism “combines anti-communism, anti-Sovietism and anti-Polonism.” Hence, the communist party became “the force which defended the good name of Poland, the only truly national and patriotic organisation”. See: K. Tyszka, *Nacjonalizm w komunizmie. Ideologia narodowa w Związku Radzieckim i Polsce Ludowej*, Warszawa 2004, p. 156.

240 See: K. A. Jeleński, “*Hańba*” czy *wstyd?*, “*Kultura*” 1968, no 5, p. 12.

In order to refute the accusations of anti-Semitism, passivity and complicity in the Holocaust made against Poles and Poland, the scheme for talking about the Holocaust was ultimately specified in March. This contra-narrative, developed for some time, probably met the social need.

Many discourse elements were repeated, but the problem of the Holocaust and Polish society's attitudes towards the Holocaust were exposed for the first time. The content of the "March talk" on this subject was a form of polemic against the accusations made by the alleged anti-Polish conspirators. The pattern of this polemic was quite banal: the blame supposedly assigned to Poles was *a rebours* shifted to Jews.

The answer to the accusation of Poles for their complicity in the Holocaust was thus accusing Jews for the collaboration with their torturers. This was the aim of the press stories about the collaboration of the *Judenräte* and Jewish police with the Nazis in ghettos. Ryszard Gontarz, and not only him, wrote about it in "Walka Młodych" weekly.²⁴¹

The answer to the accusation of Poles for their passivity was the argument of Jewish passivity. It was highlighted that Jews had humbly and passively let themselves be labelled with the Stars of David, closed in ghettos and sent to gas chambers.

Reversing the accusations did not end the campaign. Passive Jews, collaborating with the Nazis, were contrasted with heroic Poles, who never collaborated and resisted the occupiers from the beginning of the war until its end. The Righteous Among the Nations, hardly ever publicly mentioned until then, were brought back from silence.²⁴² Paradoxically, Alina Cała noted, due to the supporters of Moczar, who had the lead in belittling and playing down Jewish suffering during the war, the silence around the Righteous broke. The Righteous turned out to be useful as a "fig leaf" for the anti-Semitic propaganda.²⁴³ The press (but not only) provided evidence of their heroism and sacrifice in saving persecuted Jews.

Reading March press, one could get an impression that the undoubtedly heroic attitudes actually involved the majority of Polish society under the Nazi occupation, and was, if anything, a norm of conduct. What can indirectly confirm this impression is the fact that with time and a certain amount of ink, the number of Jews saved by Poles was increasing. The official statement of the board of the Union of Polish Writers titled "To the Writers of the World" is direct evidence

241 See: szerzej na ten temat M. Głowiński, *Pismak 1863...*, p. 73 – 76.

242 See: A. Cała, *Sprawiedliwi wśród Narodów Świata. Trudne ratowanie i gorycz*, "Miodrasz" 2007, no 1, p. 9-13.

243 See: A. Cała, *Sprawiedliwi wśród...*, p. 11-12.

of this. The statement, prepared in 1968, reads: "Every Jew and Pole of Jewish origin who was in danger during the war could find a helping hand, support and a hiding place in tens of thousands of Poles: intelligentsia, workers and peasants, which often required true heroism. In addition, the secret network 'Zegota' provided organised forms of help. This help was widespread."²⁴⁴ Besides, the content of many articles inclined to conclude that apart from strict German restrictions which hindered the provision of help to Jews, Jews themselves hindered this process: *Judenräte* and the Jewish Gestapo.

From the perspective of the help given by Poles to Jews, the campaign of calumnies against the Polish nation seemed even more vile and unjust. There was even a kind of rhetorical figure in the public discourse, which can be described as the "Jewish ingratitude". The figure was used to suggest that instead of eternal gratitude and due respect, Jews repaid Poles with nothing but accusations of passivity, collaboration and anti-Semitism; they falsified the memory of the war together with Germans by making Poles its anti-heroes and anti-Semites. It has been already mentioned how the accusations of passivity and collaboration were refuted. However, it is worth mentioning how the accusations of anti-Semitism were handled.

Similar to other charges, the accusation of anti-Semitism was refuted by accusing "Zionists" of anti-Polonism, allegedly demonstrated by the "anti-Semite" label assigned to Poles, which was ruining their image in the world outside Poland. This was relatively easy to prove during the anti-Semitic campaign: it was enough to quote the Western press, which openly reported on what was happening in Poland at the time. There were desperate attempts to identify the word "Zionism" with some anti-Polish forces or ideology, disregarding its real meaning. One of the observers of the March campaign commented that reading what had been written in Polish about this anti-Polish plot, one could conclude that Zionism "did not arise in order to create a national home for Jews in Palestine – as it is officially stated – but in order to fight against Poland and the Poles."²⁴⁵

In this way, to quote Michał Głowiński once more, the plot and the language was found to lie rather than speak of the Holocaust. The topic of the Holocaust was not treated honestly. Most importantly, the truth about the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust was not faced. Nonetheless, it was during the March campaign when the most sensitive topics for Poles were actually raised, even if it was by means of lies and half-truths, and suppressing discomfort and guilt.

244 "Życie Warszawy" 11 IV 1968. Citation after J. Leociak, *Instrumentalizacja...*, p. 454.

245 Citation after P. Lendvai, op. cit., p.167.

The problem of *szmalcownik*s and denunciators was discounted by accusing Jews of collaboration with the Nazis.²⁴⁶ The problem of the passivity of the majority of Polish society towards the Holocaust was replaced and partly justified by the passivity of the Holocaust victims. Furthermore, passive Jews were contrasted with fighting Poles, particularly the heroic Polish Righteous. The problem of anti-Semitism was suppressed and replaced with the accusation against “Zionists” (that is, Jews) of hostility towards Poland and Poles and of the conspiracy they had allegedly organised with Germany. The main objective of the conspiracy, let us remind ourselves, was to label Poles as anti-Semites and to exonerate Germans of the murder of the Jews and pin the blame for it on Poles. This could clearly undermine the martyred vision of the war years and pose a threat to the national identity based, to a large extent, on brooding over Polish heroism and suffering.

Therefore, as Michael Steinlauf rightly observed, the March campaign resulted in quite a peculiar situation: “The Holocaust” – Steinlauf writes – “has been transformed affectively into a German-Jewish conspiracy against Poles. In this extraordinary reversal, we recognise the unacceptable, unmasterable substratum of guilt connected to Polish witnessing of the Holocaust. This was an anguish most powerfully rooted precisely in those who had come of age during the war years, whose identity was directly shaped by them. Festering for twenty years, repressed psychologically in the individual psyche and politically in the public arena, this anguish was now channelled by Moczar and his followers into a system of belief that denied the facts but not feelings.”²⁴⁷

One should now ask the question: to what extent was this system of lies and half-truths, loudly articulated in the March campaign, socially accepted? Unfortunately, there is no clear answer, for there has been no relevant research of the social consciousness. There is also no answer to the question about the level of support amongst the general populace for the whole anti-Semitic campaign which started in 1967, and a year later, at its apogee, led to the forced emigration of at least several thousand Jews, Polish citizens, from Poland.

While according to some scholars, the anti-Semitic campaign was a “boorish agreement” between the government and the general populace, reached behind

246 This paradoxical situation was described by Alix Landgrebe, who wrote: “While collaboration with the Nazis was never discussed as a POLISH problem, the Jews themselves were being accused of “collaboration” with Poland’s enemies. Poles were thus being turned into victims of the Jews.” A. Landgrebe, *Polish National Identity and Deformed Memory from 1945 to the Present: Mythologizing the Polish Role in the Holocaust*, RFE/RL East European Perspectives 2004, no. 6, p. 3.

247 M. Steinlauf, *op.cit.*, p. 85-86.

the backs of Jews; others claim it had little social support.²⁴⁸ Sociological studies measuring the attitude of Poles towards different nations, conducted for the first time in Poland in 1966 by Jerzy Szacki and his team, demonstrated that 75% of respondents declared their dislike of Jews.²⁴⁹ Clearly, it would be a misinterpretation to assume that because of their concurrence with the anti-Semitic campaign, the research findings were a reliable indicator of its public support. However, according to Alina Cała, they can explain why the actions undertaken under the auspices of the state and the publically spoken words that accompanied those actions did not spark any widespread protest beyond the intelligentsia circles.²⁵⁰ State violence and repressions do not explain everything, considering that on other occasions people would overcome fear and go out to the streets to protest. Nothing similar happened, although some magazines, such as "Polityka", refused to participate in this anti-Semitic campaign, and some Polish intellectuals condemned it. The majority, however, were passive and silent spectators, and today it is difficult to judge their attitude.

It is worth returning to the question of Polish society's acceptance of the way the Holocaust, and Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust, were presented in the March campaign. Perhaps Michael Steinlauf was right to note that even if the "system of belief" of the March campaign "denied facts", it did not deny feelings and thus was widely accepted.²⁵¹ Even if the March discourse included historical untruth, it helped to alleviate and forget the difficult past and provide explanations, excuses and rationalisations for the truths that were uncomfortable for public opinion. It was reassuring to hear about Jewish passivity if one's own passivity was troubling.²⁵² It was reassuring to hear about the *Judenräte* and Jewish police's collaboration with the Nazis if the problem of *szmalcownik*s was bothering and had been never been publically examined. It was reassuring to hear about Jewish anti-Polonism if the anti-Semitic heritage of the interwar period (not to mention the anti-Semitism during and after the war) had never been

248 See: Szok Marcowy, "Midrasz" 1998, no 3, p. 18.

249 See: J. Szacki, *Polacy o sobie i innych narodach*, Warszawa 1969 (unpublished typescript available in the Institute of Sociology of the Warsaw University). Citation after A. Cała, *Mniejszość żydowska*, [in:] *Mniejszości narodowe w Polsce. Państwo i społeczeństwo polskie a mniejszości narodowe w okresach przełomów politycznych (1944-1989)*, P. Madajczyk (red.), p. 286.

250 Ibidem. p. 286-287.

251 See: M. Steinlauf, op.cit, p. 85-86..

252 Alina Cała writes about the advantages of the stereotype of "passive Jews", demonstrating that it was comfortable for public opinion, as it soothed conscience and excused people from examining it. See: A. Cała, *Kształtowanie się polskiej i żydowskiej...*, p. 177.

falsified and also even employed by the Communist Party, who had revived it for their own use.

Each of these interpretations helped people to believe that Poles had no reason to reproach themselves and provided ready-made answers to possible accusations or troubling questions. These answers, by the way, have been used ever since during various debates on the Polish-Jewish past. They were given in March for the first time and were met with approval. The aforementioned psychological mechanism is not the only confirmation of that. The support for the struggle with accusations against the Polish attitudes to the Holocaust is also indirect evidence of this, evidence that the government received from independent actors: the Catholic Church, Znak MPs [an association of lay Catholics in Poland granted several seats in the Polish Parliament (Sejm)] and Polish emigration from the West.²⁵³

The support involved only one question, which can be considered meaningful. All these actors, however separately, defended Poles from the accusations against them, which collided with their own image and the image of the war, preserved in the collective memory. They also separately defended national identity based on this collective memory, thus blocking access to the truth about themselves and about the Holocaust. Even if there were indeed some publications or statements abroad that were unfavourable to Poland, it was not an anti-Polish attack. The attack was fabricated by the government, but they were not the only ones who needed it. The fight with the imagined enemy, or with the rhetoric attributed to it, was in fact the fight with the aching past. In particular, it was the first public attempt since the war to deal with the traumatic memory of the Holocaust: by falsification and making the past more bearable.

6. Alibi for Oblivion

While Jews and the Holocaust were a taboo subject long before March '68, after March the word "Jew" alone became almost unprintable. The only exception from the official and public rule of silence were official and public subsequent anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, commemorated during the whole period of the People's Republic of Poland.²⁵⁴ These commemorations, however,

253 See: J. Eisler, op. cit., p. 326-329; D. Stola, op. cit., p. 166.

254 See: B. Szaynok, *Konteksty polityczne obchodów powstania w Getcie Warszawskim w latach 40. i w pierwszej połowie lat 50.*, "Kwartalnik Historii Żydów" 2004, no 2, p. 205-215; M. Shore, *Język, pamięć i rewolucyjna awangarda. Kształtowanie historii powstania w getcie warszawskim w latach 1944-1950*, "Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego" 1998, p. 44-66; M. Zaremba, *Zorganizowane zapominanie o Holokau-*

were in fact state-organised methods of forgetting about the Holocaust rather than cultivating the memory of it. The government held commemoration ceremonies every April. Their central place was The Jewish Ghetto Memorial, unveiled in 1948, where the highest officials and guests delivered their speeches. Commemorations were usually accompanied by solemn ceremonies and evening meetings. The press reported on all these projects and there were also thematic articles.²⁵⁵

Thus, commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising provided opportunities to speak about Jewish war martyrdom in public. Paradoxically, however, sometimes the subject was not mentioned and the “Jew” word did not even fall from the lips of the main speakers. The commemorations were rather a kind of “alibi for oblivion, for excluding the memory of the Holocaust from the pages of Polish history.”²⁵⁶ According to Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Szapiro, they were also a method “of drawing the attention away from the significant presence of anti-Semitism in Poland”.²⁵⁷ In order to avoid accusations of anti-Semitism but at the same time to make it seem as though they cared about the history of Polish Jews, the authorities built Potemkin villages at every anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

The theatricality of the anniversaries was unquestionable. Their content reflected current ideological tendencies and political trends. Important facts were neglected, desired facts were exposed and contexts were manipulated. The aim of all these solemn speeches, lectures and press articles was – Jacek Leosiak observed – to explain and clarify how the uprising should be understood and interpreted.²⁵⁸ The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a historical fact that was an excellent fit for propaganda use: it had been the first uprising against Germans in occupied Poland and the first urban uprising against them in occupied Europe.

ście w dekadzie Gierka: trwanie i zmiana, “Kwartalnik Historii Żydów” 2004, no 2, p. 216-224; M. Jazdon, *Ograniczony punkt widzenia – filmowy obraz powstania w Getcie Warszawskim*, “Kwartalnik Historii Żydów” 2004, no 2, p. 225-232; J. Leociak, *Zraniona pamięć. (Rocznice powstania w getcie warszawskim w prasie polskiej 1944-1989)*, [in:] *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, A. Brodzka-Wald, D. Krawczyńska, J. Leociak (Ed.), Warszawa 2000, p. 29-51.

255 See: G. Berendt, *Obraz powstania w getcie warszawskim w prasie PZPR (1950-1970)*, “Midrasz” 2003, no 11 p. 30-37; J. Leociak, *Zraniona pamięć. (Rocznice powstania w getcie warszawskim w prasie polskiej 1944-1989)*, [in:] *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, A. Brodzka-Wald, D. Krawczyńska, J. Leociak (red.), Warszawa 2000, p. 29-51.

256 A. Cała, *Kształtowanie się polskiej...*, p. 176.

257 K. Kersten, J. Szapiro, *Konteksty współczesnych...*, p. 282.

258 J. Leociak, *Zraniona...*, p. 35.

At the beginning, the tendency was to depict the uprising not as specifically Jewish, but rather as Jewish communists joining Stalin's anti-fascist battlefield, supported by their friends from the *Gwardia Ludowa* [People's Guard] and the Polish People's Party. The living heroes of the uprising, such as Marek Edelman, Icchak Cukierman, and Cywia Lubetkin were not even mentioned, for they did not fit the political narrative of the event,²⁵⁹ in which undesirable characters were eagerly described: Jewish bourgeoisie, collaborationist *Judenräte*, the treacherous Bund and the passive government in exile together with its Home Army. The positive heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto fought against "the bane of Fascism and Nazism", and for "the freedom and independence of the country,"²⁶⁰ or for "human dignity", which became a ritually repeated cliché used to give universal meaning to the uprising and to internationalise it.²⁶¹

Such was the image of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in the public discourse before 1953, that is, until its 10th anniversary. After Stalin's death and the Polish Thaw, significant changes appeared in this discourse. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was absorbed into the other struggles and resistance acts that made the Polish nation famous during the World War II. The intensive process of the polonisation of the uprising had its apogee in 1968, although the first symptoms of these tendencies had already appeared much earlier. According to Marcin Zaremba, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was appropriated by the state and "thrown into one urn with one single inscription: 'Polish resistance movement'".²⁶² Thus, the anniversaries of the outbreak of the uprising served mostly to remind of and confirm Polish martyrdom and heroism.

The project of the 20th anniversary of the uprising, developed by four departments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (PZPR), did not take the nationality of the insurgents into account and the word "Jew" was absent. Also, during the roll of the dead, the Jewish insurgents were passed over in silence. Instead, the speeches were devoted to the "sons and daughters of the Polish nation" who were engaged in the fight for the dignity and honour of our country."²⁶³ Kazimierz Rusinek, one of the speakers, said: "The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was one of the links in the chain of suffering and struggle in which the

259 See: G. Berendt, *Obraz powstania w getcie warszawskim...*, p. 30-37; B. Szaynok, *Konteksty polityczne obchodów powstania...*, p. 205-215.

260 Citation after M. Shore, *Język, pamięć i rewolucyjna awangarda...*, p. 46.

261 About universalisation and internalisation of the meaning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, See: J. Leociak, *Zraniona...*, p. 35-38.

262 M. Zaremba, *Urząd zapomnienia*, "Polityka" 13 X 2001, p. 73.

263 Citation after M. Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm...*, p. 329.

Polish nation was involved since the loss of September 1939 to the victory of May 1945.”²⁶⁴

Even when the Jewish insurgents were casually mentioned, it was in the context of help they received from the Polish resistance movement, particularly leftist. The magnitude of loss and suffering experienced by Poles during the war, as well as their heroism, were mentioned every time. These elements constituted the plot of all the official speeches and press articles related to the uprising anniversary, and resulted from propagandist tasks that, at the behest of the authorities, had to be fulfilled.

Other topics were also raised during the commemorations. The content of speeches, lectures and articles reflected current ideological tendencies, and was determined by them. For instance, speakers for years warned against West German militarism, which had already once led to war and was allegedly returning. On the 25th anniversary, “Zionists” (thus Jews) were decried, which was quite paradoxical. The anniversary fell at the time of the “anti-Zionist” campaign in Poland, which was reflected in the commemorations. The speakers did not fail to mention Jewish collaboration with the occupiers, treacherous *Judenräte*, the “criminal indifference” of the current leaders of Israel and the Polish aid to the Jewish insurgents. As proclaimed in the publication about the Warsaw Ghetto printed on this occasion, this aid was provided first of all by the Polish Workers' Party and the People's Guard, and personally by Władysław Gomułka, Franciszek Jóźwiak, Marian Spychalski, Zenon Kliszko and others (the Home Army was also recognised, for it had been gradually rehabilitated for some time).²⁶⁵ Thus, the laurel wreath of the Warsaw Ghetto heroes went to the heroes of the Warsaw firmament of power. Five years later, on the 30th anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising, there were speeches about the passivity “of international Jewish financiers towards the martyrdom of Jewish people.” The accusation of silence and indifference was also applied to the Vatican.²⁶⁶

None of the interpretations spoke the truth about the first urban uprising against the Nazis in occupied Poland and Europe, i.e. the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Its true picture was falsified, universalised (denying its specific character) and, most of all, polonised. There was silence about the real heroes and the direct link between the uprising and the Holocaust. The uprising was presented as an event that had no connection to the Holocaust.

From the government's perspective, such an approach was comfortable and useful. By emphasising the Polish context and character of the uprising, the

264 Citation after J. Leociak, *Zraniona pamięć...*, p. 40.

265 See: W. Poterański, *Warszawskie Getto*, Warszawa 1968, p. 11, 30-42, 60-63.

266 Citation after M. Zaremba, *Zorganizowane zapomnienie...*, p. 221.

Communist Party hoped to be perceived as Polish and familiar. This goal could be achieved, for instance, by eliminating the stereotype that the government was composed of Jews, which, to some extent, was present in the social consciousness. Facing Jewish martyrdom could only strengthen this stereotype. Moreover, the narrative pattern of speaking about the uprising, which had been elaborated and implemented for years, had yet another important advantage. It did not deprive Poles of their palm of victory in suffering or question the uniqueness of their heroism. Poles were still first in the “suffering competition.”²⁶⁷ It wasn’t only party dignitaries and the government who liked this fact. The colonisation of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was used by the authorities to establish contact with the nation by commemorating national martyrdom and strengthening the national belief of the immensity of their own suffering. In other words, it served to consolidate the essentials of how Poles thought of themselves and the elements constituting the national stereotype.

Summing up the considerations about forgetting the Holocaust within official and common memory, one should say that the memory of Jews and their war martyrdom had been long obliterated, on different levels and with the use of diverse methods. For decades, the topic had been covered with silence, lies or some convenient compilation of both. Doubtlessly, the exception was the initial postwar years, when a lot was written and spoken about the Holocaust, and, thanks to the courage of some Polish intellectuals, sensitive questions were publically articulated. Afterwards, even if the problem of Jewish martyrdom during the war was raised, it always followed the binding discursive pattern.

This pattern was based on reinterpretations, lies and concealments. It was present in historical and academic literature, in fiction and also in school textbooks, in which the topic of the Holocaust was hardly discussed or even completely disregarded. It also applied to the policy of memory about the extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau and to the commemorations of the anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Developed long before March ‘68, it was then that it reached its mature form and the capacity of reinterpreting the whole, complex war reality. Although Mieczysław Moczar’s influence weakened shortly after March and the ruling party changed, the official version of Polish history remained intact for a long time. Clearly, there were glorious exceptions to this pattern: in particular, Polish literature about the Holocaust, which has had pride of place ever since. Yet these were only exceptions.

267 Marcin Zaremba draws attention to this fact. See: M. Zaremba, *Urząd zapomnienia...*, p. 73.

According to this pattern, the Jewish history of the Nazi occupation was absorbed into Polish history, Jewish victims became Polish victims and even the word “extermination” was used to describe what happened to Poles during the war and strengthen the narrative of Polish martyrdom, which was permanently in the centre of interest. If the war experience of Jews was no different from Polish martyrdom, should the term “extermination” not describe the latter? Since the “encyclopaedist” case it had also been known that the extermination camps had been installed by the Nazis mainly for Poles. The Holocaust, as an unprecedented and specifically Jewish experience, was not included in the scheme. Obviously, neither were the sensitive subjects of the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust. The national conspiracy of silence lasted for decades. Only the passivity of the Jews and their collaboration with the Nazis were noted, according to the ready-made March patterns.

Let us now come back to the question raised at the beginning of this chapter. To what extent did this official forgetting about the Holocaust correspond with the common forgetting? To what extent did the government meet society half way? The answer was partly given by what has been already said. Official forgetting must have met the need for oblivion and corresponded with the spontaneous processes of common forgetting. Polish society wanted to erase the Holocaust from memory in order to forget their role as passive bystanders. Moreover, Poles wanted to forget about Jews, who continuously reminded them about the Holocaust. Hence, according to Ewa Hoffman, “the specific history of the Holocaust, Jewish aspects of the Polish pre-war culture and perhaps Jews themselves – they all became a taboo subject, and, as a result, were gradually forgotten.”²⁶⁸

The silence about the Holocaust can doubtlessly be interpreted as a response to the shock of witnessing it, its magnitude and incomprehensibility. Most of all, however, this silence should be interpreted by considering the consequences of being witnesses: remembering one’s own passivity, often indifference, or even complicity in the crimes of Polish *szmalcownik*s and informers. Together with the memory of the pre-war anti-Semitism and taking over of Jewish properties, it all must have caused guilty consciences. It must have brought moral discomfort even if its causes were not entirely realised or were pushed into the subconscious. The easiest way was to forget all these taboo subjects. A very prosaic regularity, verbalised by Maurice Halbwachs, is that one remembers what is comfortable to remember and forgets what is comfortable to forget.²⁶⁹

Forgetting the Holocaust in the People’s Republic of Poland was also forced by a collective need to feel like a nation made up only of victims and heroes.

268 E. Hoffman, *Sztetl*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 6 II 1998, p. 10.

269 See: M. Halbwachs, *Społeczne ramy pamięci*, Warszawa 1969, p. 122.

Officially cultivated memory of World War II met this demand and was used to build national identity based on such a belief. Placing fairly treated issues related to the martyrdom of Jews on the agenda of public discussion could seriously thwart these efforts and undermine the structure of the national stereotype, take the palm of victory away from Poles and question the dogma of the always heroic and oppressed nation.

The sense of national history, Marek Ziółkowski notes, is always easier to grasp when events conflicting with the main image are ignored.²⁷⁰ Therefore, the subject of the Holocaust, which could evoke sensitive issues and touch a chord in the nation, was disregarded in the official memory. This difficult subject was pacified by stripping it of its uniqueness, redefining it and absorbing it into the Polish history of the war and the occupation.

The memory of War World II, quite contrary to the Holocaust, was very significant for the communist government. The state attempted to establish contact with the nation and it was the memory of the war that helped the government to present their role in the national history. This memory was like a narrow bridge where the government met the society that was usually critically oriented towards it. Clearly, there were still significant differences and tensions between the official and common memory: for instance, the evaluation of the role of the Home Army or the interpretation of the Katyn massacre. Nevertheless, there was a national consensus regarding one issue: the Polish nation emerged from the wartime destruction as a nation of heroes and victims. The Holocaust was to be only “a minute, minor and somehow embarrassing element of the fate of the Polish nation, ‘sentenced for extermination.’”²⁷¹ The subject of Jewish martyrdom, which would have been raised openly and loudly, could have undermined the essence of this unwritten consensus and lead to serious deconstructions of the national identity, and national identity draws its strength and cohesion mainly from the “unifying version of the past in which the collective subject is idealised”.²⁷²

As a result, the Polish memory of the Holocaust became neurotised. The trauma of witnessing the Holocaust was not dealt with. National mourning was never announced, because the Holocaust was not regarded as exceptional. All the troubling elements and traumatic experiences related to it were erased from memory. Finally, Jews also were sentenced to oblivion. Education, memory pol-

270 M. Ziółkowski, *Pamięć i zapomnienie: Trupy w szafie polskiej zbiorowej pamięci*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2001, no 3-4, p. 8.

271 A. Cała, *Kształtowanie się polskiej i żydowskiej...*, p. 178.

272 M. Hirszowicz, E. Neyman, *Społeczne ramy niepamięci*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2001, no 3-4, p. 29.

icy, propaganda and academic research not only corresponded with forgetting but even accelerated it.²⁷³ At the same time, they caused even greater distortions of the Polish collective memory. How deep these distortions are can be proved not so much by public opinion polls, but mostly by the responses to all the debates about ambiguous Polish attitudes to the Holocaust, which took place in Poland, and the level of emotions that accompanied them.²⁷⁴ These debates clearly demonstrate that the process of collective forgetting about the Holocaust indeed took place; they also demonstrate its scale. Moreover, the discussions restore the real memories and prove that “the object of memory cannot be easily annihilated – it is rather suppressed and influences actors from behind the scene.”²⁷⁵ The first of these debates was held before 1989, at a time when not yet everything could be said in public.

273 As Henryk Szlajfer observes. See: H. Szlajfer, *Polacy/Żydzi. Zderzenie stereotypów...*, p. 80.

274 See: J. Jedlicki, *Jak się z tym uporać? Polacy wobec zagłady Żydów*, “Polityka” 10 II 2001, p. 68.

275 L. M. Nijakowski, *Baron Münchhausen czyli o polskiej polityce pamięci*, “Przegląd Polityczny” 2006, no 75, p. 56.

