

## Chapter II

### **“Poor Poles” look at “Shoah”:**

## **Recovery of the memory of the Holocaust in the country of witnesses**

### **1. Reconstructing the memory of Jews and the Holocaust in the last decade of the People’s Republic of Poland**

In the middle of October 1980, a group of Polish intellectuals issued an open letter to the editors of “Polityka” weekly, in which they attempted to reclaim the memory of the victims of March ’68. In particular, they demanded that a spade be called a spade and that the anti-Semitic campaign organised by the state in 1968 be publically condemned. The first words of the letter, however, did not refer only to this single event: “The deeper the moral renewal we go through, the more beneficial the effects of the current breakthrough will be. This renewal should include an explanation of hypocritical, seemingly outdated cases that cast a shadow on the atmosphere of our community, such as the issue of Polish-Jewish relations. The history of Polish Jews is an integral part of Polish history. A Jewish minority lived on this land for at least 700 years and made a lasting and valuable contribution to the nationwide culture. Of the occupier’s will, this land became a collective tomb of millions of Jews from Poland and other countries. Therefore, the so-called ‘Jewish question’ should not be understood as concerning only Jews, who, by the way, are very few in Poland. It is in fact a matter of great social importance; the matter should be honestly taught, written and spoken of in Poland.”<sup>276</sup>

The editorial commentary of “Polityka”, posted below the letter, suggested that the March events should not be only reduced to the “Jewish question”. Most of all, however, the editors expressed doubt whether in the “current political situation”, in the “atmosphere of widespread anxiety”, it would be sensible to reawaken old enmities again, even if they were “morally and politically justi-

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276 The letter was signed by Władysław Bartoszewski, Alina Cała, Helena Datner-Śpiewak, Michał Głowiński, Maja Komorowska, Stanisław Krajewski, Zdzisław Łapiński, Jan Józef Lipski, Konstanty Gebert, Wojciech Karpiński and others. See: *Listy do Redakcji*, “Polityka” 12 X 1980, p. 2.

fied”.<sup>277</sup> The authors of the letter did not respond to this doubt; however, the following years proved that the time had come to talk, and to talk honestly: about Jews, the Holocaust and, in particular, about Polish-Jewish past. Paraphrasing what Jacek Borkowicz wrote, the name of the deceased was finally spoken in his home and the difficult lesson of how to deal with the memory of them and the knowledge about ourselves was begun.<sup>278</sup>

This specific process of “reconstructing the memory” (as Michael Steinlauf<sup>279</sup> puts it) of Jews, the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish past, and, at the same time, reconnaissance and “breach in the prevailing area of silence”, as Henryk Szlajfer wrote<sup>280</sup>, began at the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s. The shape of this reconnaissance was determined by the restricted freedom of speech and the psychological barriers to raising some questions. In other words, one could not say in public everything one wanted to say and, in any case, there were things that people did not want to speak about. This is illustrated by censored press articles and responses to Claude Lanzmann’s film and a groundbreaking Błoński article, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The initial phases of bringing the Jewish topic to light coincided with the origin of the “Solidarity” movement and a short period of political pluralism, interrupted by the imposition of martial law in 1981. However, even if the ruling period of the Military Council of National Salvation (Polish: *Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego*, abbreviated WRON) slowed down the process of memory reconstruction, it certainly did not stop it. Manifestations of this process were visible at many levels during the last decade of the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL). In the middle of 1980s, the increase of interest in Jewish themes became a social phenomenon, if not a certain “fashion”. “Fiddler on the Roof” was attracting large audiences and the books of Isaac Bashevis Singer, describing the mysteries of Jewish *shtetls*, gained great popularity. To what extent was it a manifestation of the feeling of emptiness, expressed in Antoni Słonimski’s poem “Elegia miasteczek żydowskich” [Elegy of Jewish towns], and to what extent was it only an interest in the exotic folklore of strangers? It is difficult to answer, particularly since the former does not necessarily exclude the latter.

The aroused interest in Jewish themes was noticed and described by Wiktor Kulerski in the underground, oppositionist magazine “Krytyka”. Kulerski suggested that such a moment should be used to “straighten out false and schematic

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277 See: *Od Redakcji*, “Polityka” 12 X 1980, p. 2.

278 See: J. Borkowicz, *Parę słów o Żydach i Polakach*, “Więź” 1996, no 7, p. 63.

279 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, op.cit., p. 89-121.

280 See: H. Szlajfer, *Polacy/Żydzi. Zderzenie stereotypów*, Warszawa 2003, p. 21.

views” and “oppose the attempts to resuscitate old prejudices and obsessions.”<sup>281</sup> This challenge had been already faced by some intellectuals before Kulerski published his text, and continued after the publication. It would be hard to deny that it was Polish intellectuals who brought to light the subject of the difficult Polish-Jewish past. It was they who broke the prevailing taboo and shameful silence. Many belonged to or identified with democratic opposition, which attempted to deny the false version of history and to explore its *terra incognita*.

The activists of Polish liberation movements, from the Committee for Social Self-Defence (KOR) to the “Solidarity” movement, not only condemned anti-Semitism but also unmasked its manifestations and stigmatised them whenever it was possible. Admittedly, before the imposition of martial law, some words that had fallen from the lips of some activists contradicted this rule and brought discredit to the movement. However, self-proclaimed eulogists of anti-Semitic enunciations, such as Marian Jurczyk, who identified Jews with state power, were criticised or even ostracised.<sup>282</sup> One of the ideological aspirations of the liberation movements was “the need for authentic cleansing – not only a superficial and alibied one – of the sin of omission of the acts against Jews and the silence over them, particularly if Poles were the perpetrators.” It was the need for a real catharsis related to past actions.<sup>283</sup>

Even if authors of these observations overestimated the role of democratic opposition and the importance of the Jewish question among their ideological aspirations, the driving force of the processes of memory reconstruction should doubtlessly be regarded as crucial. The Polish calendar of public holidays was then supplemented with a whole range of new anniversaries that had never officially been celebrated before. Oppositionists claimed not only dates, but also memorials, events and people from the past. They wished to revive them, bring them back or to embed them into the national memory. Their interest included both the victims of Katyń and of December 1970. Not without reason did the historian of ideas, Bronisław Baczeko, name this period “an explosion of memory” and a popular joke at the time was about Poles who were going to run out of days in a year to celebrate their martyrdom.<sup>284</sup> Thus, the period of

281 The article was written by Wiktora Kulerskiego in November, 1987. It was published at the beginning of 1988. See: W. Kulerski, *Na marginesie “żydowskiego” numeru “Aneksu”*, “Krytyka” 1988, no 27, p. 184.

282 See: M. Wiewiorka, *Les Juifs, la Pologne et Solidarité*, Paris 1984.

283 See: Kersten, J. Szapiro, *Konteksty współczesnych odniesień polsko-żydowskich*, “Więź” 1998, no 3, p. 292-293.

284 B. Baczeko, *Polska czasów “Solidarności”, czyli eksplozja pamięci*, [in:] *Wyobrażenia społeczne. Szkice o nadziei i pamięci zbiorowej*, B. Baczeko, Warszawa 1994, p. 193-249.

“memory explosion” was perfect to remind Poles about Polish Jews and about what had happened to them during the war, before the Polish eyes.

The role of democratic opposition in the reconstruction of the memory of Jews, Polish-Jewish relations and the Holocaust cannot be denied. Neither can one question the efforts of the scholars whose publications on the subject increased in number in the last decade of the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL). However, the role of the state in the reconstruction process is less obvious. It is worth noticing, Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Szapiro observe, that the state’s official manifestation of its interest in Jewish themes was ostentatious.

The authorities wanted the Jewish subject to be well-known, and this was manifested at many different levels. Jewish fiction was available in bookshops; Jewish culture could be learnt in theatres; press readers had access to it.<sup>285</sup> Most probably, monographic issues of Catholic magazines devoted to Jewish themes would not have been released without governmental consent. On the other hand, taboo subjects did not cease to exist, which was well demonstrated by the response of “Polityka” editors to the subject of March 1968. Official discourse included only glorious and heroic attitudes of Poles towards Jews during the war and all public attempts to correct this biased judgement were regarded as anti-Polish. March clichés and plots kept reappearing in literature; for instance, in Waclaw Poterański’s book about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which was reprinted in 1983.<sup>286</sup>

The same year, bookshop shelves filled with Józef Orlicki’s “Szkice z dziejów stosunków polsko-żydowskich 1918-1949” [Sketches of the History of Polish-Jewish Relations 1918-1949]. It included a series of lies, obvious to anyone, and distortions following the prevailing discursive pattern. One of these lies was that the Kielce pogrom was inspired by Zionists, and that they and actively participated in it. Orlicki also claimed that Jewish plutocracy, “particularly Zionists and groups related to the World Agudat Yisrael” [an Orthodox Jewish organisation – the author’s note] had not avoided ‘the practice of destroying’ communist Jews” considered as ‘Jewish dissenters’. Finally, according to Orlicki, Jewish nationalists slandered Poles by accusing them of “zoological anti-Semitism.”<sup>287</sup>

Detailed analysis of this subject is not the aim of this book. Suffice to say that the authorities were concerned about changing their image abroad and getting rid of the anti-Semitic odium upon the country. To gain international esteem and move out of isolation, Wojciech Jaruzelski’s team decided to show to the world how much significance was attached to Jewish culture and the memory of

285 K. Kersten, J. Szapiro, *Konteksty współczesnych...*, p. 292.

286 See: W. Poterański, *Warszawskie getto*, Warszawa 1983.

287 J. Orlicki, *Szkice z dziejów stosunków polsko-żydowskich*, Szczecin 1983, p. 251-263.

the Jews in Poland. Such was the purpose of the sudden interest in Jewish culture and the ostentatious commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In addition, one should not forget that there were still people in the communist party, holding various positions, who remembered the leadership of Mieczysław Moczar with nostalgia and whose worldview was equal to the nationalist version of communism.<sup>288</sup> Without doubt, they reluctantly watched Jewish themes appearing in public discourse and blocked the process of memory reconstruction. Nevertheless, the opportunism and conformism of the state resulted in substantial benefits, which were manifested, for instance, in the number of books on Jewish topics on the bookstore shelves.

These were the circumstances of the process of the reconstruction of memory about Jews, the Holocaust and the difficult Polish-Jewish past. Its main initiators were Polish intellectuals of diverse provenience and professions: political scientists, sociologists, literati, etc; people involved in democratic opposition or those who had nothing in common with it. Partly, Polish government also participated in this process: through distance and passivity, which, in fact, meant permission. Various efforts were made to restore the memory that had been suppressed and confiscated until then. Therefore, the influence of all the publications, films, cultural and academic endeavours, celebrations and discursive events was of diverse intensity and range. It would be impossible to compare the scope of influence of a film broadcast just before the main edition of the TV news with an article photocopied by an underground magazine. Similarly, it would be impossible to compare the words of John Paul II at his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau with a publication of an important academic paper. However, it is worth presenting a broad spectrum of the events that can be classified as components of the process of the reconstruction of memory in the public discourse in the last decade of the PRL.

Considering different levels of the phenomena that constituted this process, it is necessary to distinguish between the publications on Jewish topics and events such as the Pope's visit to Auschwitz, anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, or new monuments in the public space, and to analyse them separately. The first public debates on the Polish attitudes towards Jews and the Holocaust, which took place in Poland before 1989, should also be a separate subject of analysis.

Without doubt, the number of publications related to Jewish topics that appeared in the last decade of the PRL makes this period similar only to the years immediately following the war. Considering the long silence over the history

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288 See: M. Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*, Warszawa 2001, p. 383-397.

and culture of Jews and the Holocaust in particular, this last decade was doubtlessly an important turn. It was then when numerous historical studies were published, which not only raised the question of the fate of Jews during the war, but also discussed older history; for instance, the works of Artur Eisenbach<sup>289</sup>, Alina Cała<sup>290</sup>, and Henryk Piasecki<sup>291</sup>. Admittedly, the majority of these authors were associated with the Jewish Historical Institute, which conducted Jewish studies for the whole PRL period. However, this was not the case for all of them.

The majority of the historical works published at the time dealt with various aspects of the Holocaust. Some authors analysed the help given by Poles to the Jews during the occupation, sometimes exaggerating it,<sup>292</sup> but just as often providing reliable data, which has been proving valuable even up to now.<sup>293</sup> Moreover, interesting studies, both monographs and sourcebooks, were published about the organisation and conditions of the Warsaw Ghetto. As for the latter, particular attention should be paid to “Dziennik getta warszawskiego” by Adam Czerniakow<sup>294</sup>, “Kronika getta warszawskiego” by Emanuel Ringelblum<sup>295</sup>, “Pamiętniki z getta warszawskiego. Fragmenty i rejestry”<sup>296</sup>, and, most of all, fragments of the invaluable Ringelblum’s Archive, edited by Ruta Sakowska.<sup>297</sup> Jewish history was also examined in the academic journals, with the Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute at the top of the list.<sup>298</sup>

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- 289 A. Eisenbach, *Emancypacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich 1785-1870 na tle europejskim*, Warszawa 1988; A. Eisenbach, *Z dziejów ludności żydowskiej w Polsce w XVIII i XIX wieku*, Warszawa 1983.
- 290 A. Cała, *Asymilacja Żydów w Królestwie Polskim (1864-1897). Postawy, konflikty, stereotypy*, Warszawa 1989.
- 291 H. Piasecki, *Sekcja żydowska PPSD i Żydowska Partia Socjalno-Demokratyczna 1892-1919/20*, Warszawa 1982.
- 292 See: W. Bielawski, Cz. Pilichowski, *Zbrodnie na Polakach dokonane za pomoc udzielaną Żydom*, Warszawa 1981, p. 6-7.
- 293 See: np. T. Prekerowa, *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Żydom w Warszawie 1942-1945*, Warszawa 1982; M. Arczyński, *Kryptonim Żegota. Z dziejów pomocy Żydom w Polsce 1939-1945*, Warszawa 1979, wydanie drugie Warszawa 1983; M. Arczyński, W. Balcerak, *Kryptonim Żegota*, Warszawa 1983; W. Smólski, *Za to groziła śmierć. Polacy z pomocą Żydom w czasie okupacji*, Warszawa 1981.
- 294 A. Czerniaków, *Dziennik getta warszawskiego 6 IX 1939-13 VII 1942*, Warszawa 1983.
- 295 E. Ringelblum, *Kronika getta warszawskiego*, Warszawa 1983.
- 296 M. Grynberg (ed.), *Pamiętniki z getta warszawskiego. Fragmenty i rejestry*, Warszawa 1988
- 297 R. Sakowska (ed.), *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto warszawskie lipiec 1942 – styczeń 1943*, Warszawa 1980
- 298 See: szerzej M. Czajka, *Bibliografia zawartości “Biuletynu Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” (1950-2000)*, “Kwartalnik Historii Żydów” (do 2000 roku Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego) 2001, no 3, p. 393-531.

Academic literature did not avoid the subjects that were sensitive for Poles. Analysing the ideology and organisation of pre-war nationalist organisations, Szymon Rudnicki and Roman Wapiński discussed the anti-Semitism of these groups and Polish society’s susceptibility to it.<sup>299</sup> In his work on the Blue Police, Adam Hempel examined the role of this organisation in the persecution and extermination of the Jewish population, despite the difficulty of the subject and its links to the Polish collaboration.<sup>300</sup> Kazimierz Wyka’s “*Życie na niby*” [Life as If], regarding social and economic life under the Nazi occupation, definitely referred to the Polish conscience. In his book, first published in 1957 and complemented and reprinted in 1986, Wyka used harsh words to describe the problem of the acquisition of properties of the Holocaust victims: the problem of Poles who became more or less coincidental beneficiaries of someone else’s misery. The author seemed to have asked: “How do Poles cope with this knowledge?”<sup>301</sup>

The subject of the Polish-Jewish past was also present in a documentary work of fundamental historical importance, written by Emanuel Ringelblum, published in 1988, and entitled: “*Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie II wojny światowej*”. The author did not limit his analysis to the war period; he also included Polish-Jewish relations before the war.<sup>302</sup> Another author who raised the subject of Poles and Jews living next to each other in pre-war Poland was the sociologist Aleksander Hertz in “*Żydzi w kulturze polskiej*”: the “opus magnum” of his life, as he called it. The book was first published in 1961 by the Literary Institute in Paris, but its first Polish edition was only released in 1988. It also could not avoid censorship, which removed the introduction written by the author.<sup>303</sup>

In the last decade of the PRL, Polish historians who studied Jewish history and the Holocaust not only published their research results, but also presented their work at international conferences devoted to Polish-Jewish relations. These conferences provided an opportunity to present the achievements of Polish historians and to establish contacts and ensure international research cooperation. They also offered an excellent forum for exchanging ideas and experiences and

299 See: Sz. Rudnicki, *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny. Geneza i działalność*, Warszawa 1985; R. Wapiński, *Narodowa Demokracja 1893-1939*, Warszawa 1989.

300 A. Hempel, *Pogrobowcy kłęski. Rzecz o policji “granatowej” w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie 1939-1945*, Warszawa 1985, p. 166-189.

301 K. Wyka, *Życie na niby*, Warszawa 1986.

302 A. Eisenbach (ed.), E. Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie II wojny światowej*, Warszawa 1988.

303 A. Hertz, *Żydzi w kulturze polskiej*, Warszawa 2003, p. 319-323; Książka ta ukazała się również w 1987 nakładem podziemnej Oficyny Wydawniczej “Margines”.

for discussing sensitive issues. The first such conference took place in 1983 in New York and was entitled: “Poles and Jews: myth and reality in historical context”.<sup>304</sup> Another, which was attended by historians from Poland, Israel and the USA, was organised a year later in Oxford.<sup>305</sup> It was at this conference where an initiative was developed to edit a journal entirely devoted to the history of Polish Jews. It was first entitled “Polin. A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies”, but the name was later changed into “Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry” (Polin means “Poland” in Yiddish). The first issue of the journal was published in 1986. “Polin” has remained to be an esteemed journal in which researchers from different countries present their research results. The current editor-in-chief is Antony Polonsky.

Finally, an international conference devoted to the history of Polish Jews took place in Poland, in 1986 in Cracow. It was attended by scholars from France, Israel, Great Britain, the USA and Poland. The subject of the conference was “Autonomy of Jews in Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth”, which, as the journalists rightly observed, should not have aroused “any emotions except academic interest.”<sup>306</sup> The event was meaningful for two reasons. First, because it was the first endeavour of this kind; second, because it inaugurated an interdepartmental program in the history and culture of Polish Jews at the Jagiellonian University. It had been the second such initiative in Poland, after the Department of Jewish Culture at the University of Warsaw. The status and character of the Jewish Historical Institute or the Flying University (Polish: Uniwersytet Latający) was different. The latter, very specific and non-institutionalised, was intended as an informal discussion forum and was founded in the 1980s by young Polish Jews discovering their identity and sometimes called “the new Jews”. In their search for knowledge about Jewish culture, tradition, history, etc., they

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304 The conference was held on 6-10 March 1983. It resulted in a publication: *Proceedings of the Conference of Poles and Jews – Myth and Reality in the Historical Context*, Held and Columbia University, 6-10 March 1983, Institute on East Central Europe, Columbia University, New York 1986.

305 The conference was held in September 1984. The presented papers were published 2 years later. See: Ch. Abramsky, M. Jachimczyk, A. Polonsky (ed.), *The Jews in Poland*, Oxford 1986; Another conference entitled “History and culture of Polish Jews” was held at the end of January and the beginning of February 1988 in Jerusalem. Almost a hundred Poles took part.

306 J. Gaworski, A. Gorzała, *Polacy-Żydzi po raz pierwszy*, “Więź” 1986, no 11-12, p. 215; See: także A. Link-Lenczowski, T. Polański (ed.), *Żydzi w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej. Materiały z konferencji “Autonomia Żydów w Rzeczypospolitej Szlacheckiej”*. Międzywydziałowy Zakład Historii i Kultury Żydów w Polsce Uniwersytet Jagielloński 22-26 IX 1986, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1991.

started gathering in private homes, where they organised informal lectures and seminars. Jewish and non-Jewish experts, Polish and foreign, were invited as speakers. Sometimes the members elaborated on some subjects on their own, and others were only discussed as a group. The imposition of the martial law, however, ended the short activity of the Flying University.

Returning to publications about war martyrdom of Jews, one should not forget about particular sources of data, first published or reprinted in the 1980s: diaries, journals and memoirs written during and after the war. This diverse literature was written by the victims and witnesses of the Holocaust, both children and adults: Dawid Rubinowicz<sup>307</sup>, Janusz Korczak<sup>308</sup>, Halina Birenbaum<sup>309</sup>, Janina Bauman<sup>310</sup>, Irena Birnbaum<sup>311</sup>, Mary Berg<sup>312</sup>, Henryk Makower<sup>313</sup>, Arnold Mostowicz<sup>314</sup>, Jerzy Eisner<sup>315</sup>, Eugenia Szajn-Lewin<sup>316</sup>, Jona Oberski<sup>317</sup>, Stefana Chaskielewicz<sup>318</sup>, and Leokadia Schmidt<sup>319</sup>. The above list of authors is obviously incomplete. Moreover, in 1979 and 1987, a very popular book-length interview given to Hanna Krall by the hero of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Mark Edelman, was reprinted.<sup>320</sup>

Particular attention should also be given to another kind of witness literature: poetry by Holocaust victims. Books of poems released at the time included, for instance, the works of Władysław Szlengel, a poet of the Warsaw Ghetto<sup>321</sup>, and “Wiersze wybrane” [Selected Poems] by Zuzanna Ginczanka<sup>322</sup>. Unfortu-

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307 D. Rabinowicz, *Pamiętnik*, Warszawa 1987. (First issued: 1960)

308 J. Korczak, *Pamiętnik*, Poznań 1984; Earlier edition, see: J. Korczak, *Wybór pism*, t. 4, Warszawa 1958.

309 H. Birenbaum, *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia*, Warszawa 1988. (First issued: 1967)

310 J. Bauman, *Zima o poranku. Opowieść dziewczynki z Warszawskiego Getta*, Kraków 1989.

311 I. Birnbaum, *Non omnis moriar. Pamiętnik z getta warszawskiego*, Warszawa 1982.

312 M. Berg, *Dziennik z getta warszawskiego*, Warszawa 1983.

313 H. Makower, *Pamiętnik z getta warszawskiego październik 1940-styczeń 1943*, Wrocław 1987.

314 A. Mostowicz, *Żółta gwiazda i czerwony krzyż*, Warszawa 1988.

315 J. Eisner, *Przeżyłem!*, Warszawa 1988.

316 E. Szajn-Lewin, *W getcie warszawskim*, Poznań 1989.

317 J. Oberski, *Lata dzieciństwa*, Warszawa 1988.

318 S. Chaskielewicz, *Ukrywałem się w Warszawie, styczeń 1943 – styczeń 1945*, Kraków 1988.

319 L. Schmidt, *Cudem przeżyliśmy czas zagłady*, Kraków 1983.

320 H. Krall, *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem*, Kraków 1977. (next issues: 1979, 1989, 1992, 1997)

321 W. Szlengel, *Co czytałem umarłym*, Warszawa 1979.

322 Z. Ginczanka, *Wiersze wybrane*, Warszawa 1980.

nately, none of the authors survived the Holocaust. However, their poetry – a testimony of the “crematoria era” – included questions that were not asked in postwar Poland, presented in poetic form the indifference of Poles towards the Holocaust, highlighted the differences between Poles and Jews in their war experiences and brought up the *szmalcownik* figures.<sup>323</sup> Certainly, the Holocaust was also considered by other Polish poets whose works were published at the time: Polish Jews and Poles, both victims and witnesses, for instance: Czesław Miłosz, Stanisław Wygodzki and Jerzy Ficowski. The latter was classified by Henryk Grynberg as “one of the most important voices on the memory side”<sup>324</sup>.

In the last decade of the PRL, numerous novels devoted to the Holocaust were also released. Although the vast majority had been first published much earlier, new editions came out in the decade of interest in the Jewish topic, during the process of “recovering the subject of the Holocaust.”<sup>325</sup> Achievements of Polish literature devoted to the Holocaust, novels in particular, were “greater than superpowers”<sup>326</sup>, to quote Henryk Grynberg again. The authors wrote openly about Polish indifference towards the Holocaust, about *szmalcowniki* and Polish anti-Semitism; suffice to mention “Początek” by Andrzej Szczypiorski or “Umschlagplatz” by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz.<sup>327</sup>

A kind of phenomenon, shrewdly observed by Jan Błoński, was the presence of Polish Jews in the field of Polish literature. Although these writers wrote not only about the Holocaust, it was the main subject of their interest, which allowed them to refer to the bygone world of Polish Jews and describe the void they left. Błoński referred to this phenomenon as to “the most cruel paradox”, for “Jewish presence in the field of novel, or even in Polish literature in general, had never been more visible than after the Holocaust.”<sup>328</sup> Błoński commented on

323 It is worth noticing that Zuzanna Ginczanka’s poem: “Non omnis moria” was used in 1946 as evidence in the case of Zofia and Marian Chomin, who were accused of denouncing Jews (including the author of the poem). See: A. Haska, *Znałam tylko jedną Żydóweczkę ukrywającą się... Sprawa Zofii i Mariana Chominów*, “Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały” 2008, no 4, p. 392-408.

324 H. Grynberg, *Holocaust w literaturze polskiej*, [in:] *Prawda nieartystyczna*, H. Grynberg, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2003, p. 179.

325 Such an expression relating to Polish literature of 1990s devoted to the Holocaust was used by Przemysław Czapliński See: P. Czapliński, *Odyskiwanie Zagłady*, “Przegląd Polityczny” 2003, no 61, p. 72-80.

326 H. Grynberg, *Holocaust w literaturze polskiej*, [in:] *Prawda nieartystyczna*, H. Grynberg, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2003, p. 179.

327 A. Szczypiorski, *Początek*, Paryż 1986; J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Umschlagplatz*, Warszawa 1988.

328 J. Błoński, *Autoportret żydowski czyli o żydowskiej szkole w literaturze polskiej*, [in:] *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*, J. Błoński, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1996, p. 63.

this paradox quite emphatically, writing that Jewish literature in Polish language in the postwar period, novels in particular, “flourished – quite literally – at the graveyard.”<sup>329</sup>

During the discussed period, Jewish themes were present not only in popular and academic literature, but also in official and underground Polish press. A special issue of “Znak” monthly, published in 1983, and almost 600 pages long, was devoted only to this subject. In his introduction, Stefan Wilkanowicz called for national self-examination regardless of the “opportunistic topicality” of Jewish themes.<sup>330</sup> In the same year, the Catholic “Więź” magazine also published a whole issue devoted to the Jewish minority and to Polish-Jewish relations.<sup>331</sup> Both magazines had occasionally included the subject before, but since the beginning of the 1980s it had remained there for good. 1983 was the groundbreaking inauguration of writing about Jewish issues, which the content of the following issues of the magazines clearly demonstrates.<sup>332</sup> Hence, the role these Catholic magazines (also “Tygodnik Powszechny”) had in breaking the silence about Jews and the Holocaust seems invaluable from a time perspective, as the first debates on the Holocaust, Polish-Jewish past and Polish anti-Semitism were held in their columns.

These difficult subjects were also examined by the underground press. Having escaped from the limitations to free speech, underground magazines featured even more articles about sensitive subjects, with even more courage and firmness than before. Already in 1980, on the wave of the “Solidarity carnival” and “the explosion of memory”, a supplement to “Biluetyn Dolnośląski”, entitled “Jews and Poles” was published. The occasion was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the ghettos. The editorial included an appeal: “We have recalled the Katyn Massacre and the murder of the Baltic countries. Perhaps we should also recall Palmiry. We MUST [original spelling – the author’s note] recall the beginning of the extermination of Jews in Europe”. The editorial later reads: “Let us leave general problems. Let us look at Polish Jews. Not only to pay homage to their martyrdom, but also because the Jewish topic is still a problem for us, even if Jews are no longer among us.” The problems signalled in this fragment were discussed later in the article: the problem of “our ignorance” about the cultural, religious and social life of the former citizens of Poland, the problem of “our conscience burdened with the pre-war anti-Jewish excesses”, ghetto bench-

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329 J. Błoński, *Autoportret...*, p. 76.

330 S. Wilkanowicz, *Antysemityzm, patriotyzm, chrześcijaństwo*, “Znak” 1983, no 2-3, p. 171.

331 See: “Więź” 1983, no 4.

332 See: Z. Nosowski (opr.), *Tematyka polsko-żydowska w “Więzi”*, “Więź” 1993, no 3, p. 65-70.

es at universities and the indifference towards the Holocaust of parts of Polish society, and the contemporary manifestations of anti-Semitism.<sup>333</sup>

“Aneks”, a London emigration magazine, also published a special issue devoted to the Polish-Jewish past and was entitled: “Jews as a Polish problem”.<sup>334</sup> It included an important essay by Jan Tomasz Gross: “Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej ... ale go nie lubię” [“This one is from my fatherland ... but I don’t like him”]. The title was a deliberate and clear reference to the publication edited by Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna, which concerned Polish help given to Jews during the occupation.

There were more essays and articles in the official and underground press; the authors of these pieces also dealt with the problem of the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust. Putting their chronology aside, it is important to mention “Tabu i niewinność” by Aleksander Smolar<sup>335</sup>, “Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy” by Jan Józef Lipski<sup>336</sup>, “Dziedzictwo i odpowiedzialność zbiorowa” by Jerzego Jedlicki<sup>337</sup>, and, in particular, the groundbreaking essay by Jan Błoński “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”, which will later be discussed in detail for its contribution to an important public debate.

Before analysing the first public debates about the Polish-Jewish past and memory, it is worth mentioning certain events that stimulated or confirmed the process of memory reconstruction. The former was certainly the visit of John Paul II to Auschwitz-Birkenau in June 1979, that is, less than a year after Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope. The words spoken by the Pope in Warsaw and Nowa Huta were extremely important and the whole pilgrimage to Poland became a watershed event.

From the perspective of this book, the words which fell from the Pope’s lips in Auschwitz-Birkenau were most important. Stopping at the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism in Birkenau and taking notice of the plaques in different languages at its base, John Paul II said: “This inscription invites us to remember the people whose sons and daughters were doomed to total extermination. This people has its origin in Abraham, our father in faith

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333 See: “Biuletyn Dolnośląski”, *Żydzi i Polacy. Dodatek specjalny*, 1980 (listopad-grudzień), no 11/18, p. 1-2; citation after: M. Steinlauf, *Pamięć...*, p. 116-117.

334 See: “Aneks” 1986, no 41-42.

335 See: A. Smolar, *Tabu i niewinność*, “Aneks” 1986, no 41-42, p. 75-121.

336 Lipski’s essay, the full title of which is: *Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy (uwagi o megalomanii narodowej i ksenofobii Polaków)* [Two fatherlands, two patriotisms: remarks on Polish national megalomania and xenophobia] was first published in 1981 in Warsaw by Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza (NOWA).

337 See: J. Jedlicki, *Dziedzictwo i odpowiedzialność zbiorowa*, “Res Publica” 1987, no 5, p. 73.

(cf. *Rom* 4:11-12), as Paul of Tarsus has said. This, the very people that received from God the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ itself experienced in a particular measure what killing means. No one is permitted to pass by this inscription with indifference.”<sup>338</sup>

John Paul II demanded that Jews be remembered as victims of the Holocaust, and his words were quoted by the press. By noticing the vastness of Jewish martyrdom, he spoke on behalf of the absent. What is more, he did it at the site that symbolised the Holocaust. The Pope’s words can certainly be considered as a breakthrough and an inaugural stage of the process of reconstructing Polish memory of the Holocaust. By having his say in Birkenau, John Paul II contributed to this process, as he similarly did a few years later when he took an important step towards ecumenical dialogue by crossing the threshold of a Roman synagogue.

The Pope’s visit to the former camp, however, also initiated the process of Christianisation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, although not through the fault or direct participation of the Pope. Communist symbols were replaced by Catholic ones and anonymous victims became to be embodied by Maksymilian Kolbe and Edyta Stein, a founder and editor of interwar anti-Semitic press and a Jew who converted to Catholicism but died in Auschwitz because of her origin; both were canonised by John Paul II. The Christianisation of Auschwitz-Birkenau combined with a tendency to Polishise its victims provoked strong protests from Jews, which ended in several Polish-Jewish conflicts. The first was related to a Carmelite Sisters monastery located in the area within the borders of the camp. It began in 1985 and for a long time attracted the attention of Polish and international public opinion.

Commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were also significant for the process of the recovery and reconstruction of the Polish memory of the Holocaust. In particular, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising was a groundbreaking and noteworthy event. As has been already mentioned, General Wojciech Jaruzelski’s team wished to get support and economic help from the West and thus took care to present the country in a favourable light. After the imposition of martial law, this need was even more burning. In order to improve the image of Poland around the world, Jaruzelski’s team decided to use the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This move was inspired by a stereotypical and not very sophisticated belief that Jews had considerable influence

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338 <http://www.centrum-dialogu.oswiecim.pl/strona.php?lang=pl&id=274> [accessed: 22 IV 2006r.]

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/pont\\_messages/2005/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20050127\\_auschwitz-birkenau\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/pont_messages/2005/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20050127_auschwitz-birkenau_en.html)

on shaping the world's public opinion. The government had already flirted "publicly with so-called philosemitic trends"<sup>339</sup> for some time, which was demonstrated, for instance, by the number of books in stores. An element of this flirtation was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising, to which Jews and Jewish organisations from all around the world were invited.

Against the organisers' intentions, as Ireneusz Krzemiński noted, "this political plan of the general failed."<sup>340</sup> Underground press published an open letter by Marek Edelman, the last living leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, in which the author called on his readers to boycott the official commemorations organised under the control of the still binding martial law. His letter was reprinted by the Western press and although not all the invited guests heeded the appeal and some decided to participate in the event, the significance of the commemorations was considerably depreciated. Most importantly, the state monopoly in organising the anniversary of the uprising was broken. A few days before the official anniversary, alternative commemorations were prepared by people connected with the democratic opposition and by young Polish Jews. They laid flowers at the Jewish Ghetto Memorial, gave speeches and recited Kaddish. Another alternative commemoration took place at the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw.

Since then, unofficial commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising have been regular events, but on a different scale. According to Michael Steinlauf, who participated in many commemorative events in person, they "became ever more closely intertwined with the Polish political struggle."<sup>341</sup> What demonstrates this process are underground postage stamps with Lech Wałęsa's image, the "Solidarity" logo, or the Kotwica symbol (the emblem for the Polish struggle to regain independence), and stamps with the well known image of a ghetto fighter being led out from a bunker or a terrified Jewish boy with his hands raised above the head. By the way, the latter photo became a kind of a "symbol of the extermination of European Jews and one of the most often used images of the Holocaust".<sup>342</sup>

During independent celebration of the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising, "Solidarity" activists solemnly unveiled a monument in memory of Victor Alter and Henryk Ehrlich, leaders of the Bund who had been murdered in

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339 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead...*, p. 108.

340 I. Krzemiński, *Razem a osobno*, "Dialog" 2002, no 60, p. 76.

341 M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, op.cit, p. 108

342 See: J. Struk, *Holokaust w fotografiach. Interpretacje dowodów*, Warszawa 2007, p. 118, 265-267; F. Rousseau, *Żydowskie dziecko z Warszawy. Historia pewnej fotografii*, Gdańsk 2012.

the Soviet Union.<sup>343</sup> According to Michael Steinlauf, “competition to appropriate the meaning of the uprising climaxed in 1988, for its forty-fifth anniversary”, because that year the government also decided to give the anniversary a special setting.<sup>344</sup> For this reason, new monuments were erected in the streets surrounding the ghetto. These were stones bearing the names of persons linked with the uprising, leading from the ghetto memorial to a new monument that had been erected at the site of the Umschlagplatz, from where around three hundred thousand Jews had been deported to extermination camps. This new Memorial Route for Jewish Martyrdom and Struggle was unveiled on 19 April 1988 and was intended to symbolically represent Jewish suffering and to mark within the public space the last road of the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Umschlagplatz.<sup>345</sup> While the state was the author of this initiative, the monument at the Umschlagplatz was erected in 1988 and was mainly inspired by Polish intellectuals. It replaced a petrol station that had been located there until 1980s, which was a significant event from the perspective of the analysed process of the reconstruction of memory of the Holocaust.

The monument was designed by Hanna Szmalenberg and Władysław Klamerus. It is a marble gate with a vault of a semicircular granite stone with a motif of a shattered forest. Inside, glimpsed through a cut in the wall, one sees a living tree, grown after the war. A plaque reads: “Along this path of suffering and death over 300,000 Jews were driven in 1942-1943 from the Warsaw Ghetto to the gas chambers of the Nazi extermination camps.” Exactly 438 names are engraved on the wall, from Abel to Żanna. Additionally, on the side wall of the monument a quotation from the Book of Job reads: “O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place.” All the inscriptions are in Polish, Yiddish, English and Hebrew.

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343 M. Steinlauf, op.cit., p. 109

344 Ibidem, p. 125.

345 This route is still marked by seventeen stone blocks of black syenite, which bear the names of Emanuel Ringelblum, Janusz Korczak, Shmuel Zygielbojm, Arie Wilner, the activist Joseph Lewartowski from PPR, Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum, as well as the poet Yitzhak Katzenelson. It begins with an oak, planted near the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, next to the first of the seventeen stone blocks with an inscription written in Polish and Hebrew: “The tree of shared memory. To Polish Jews who were murdered between 1939 and 1945 by the German invaders and to the Poles who died helping you.” The route is surmounted by the statue in Umschlagplatz. See: B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście*, Warszawa 2001, p. 765-766; See: także J. Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1993, p. 203-205; M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead...*, p. 108.

It was in the middle of the 1990s when the multi-language plaques around the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism in Birkenau, which clearly hid the truth about the main victims of this death camp, were replaced.

The process of reconstructing Polish memory about Jews and the Holocaust in the 1980s, including the difficult Polish-Jewish past, was manifested also in other ways, for example, the weeks of Jewish culture organised by the Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej (KIK; English: Club of Catholic Intellectuals), the initiatives related to the Christian-Jewish dialogue and an academic session on the topic of March 1968 organised at the University of Warsaw. In addition, what deserve particular attention are the first public debates, which violated the national taboo about the attitudes of Polish society towards Jews and, in particular, the Holocaust. The impulses that prompted these debates were two profoundly moving works of art: Claude Lanzmann's film "Shoah" and Jan Błóński's essay "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto". Although using different methods, both authors touched the sensitive side of Polish self-knowledge and began the process of deconstructing the national auto-stereotype. Defensive responses to their works can prove how sensitive the subject was and how much it was repressed.

## 2. "Shoah" in Poland: identification of the areas of repression

"Shoah" premiered in France in May 1985.<sup>346</sup> It was the crowning of a 9-year work by the director, whose camera recorded about 350 hours. Finally, however, Lanzmann chose 9 for the viewers' eyes. The monumental work he created is difficult to describe or classify. What is certain is that Lanzmann spoke about the Holocaust. However, his film is not about its causes or about the racial policy of the Third Reich, or the Polish-Jewish past, or about anti-Semitism – even if each of these topics is to some extent present in the movie. "Shoah" is about the Holocaust and its various aspects, and about the detailed process of its implementation, but it is important that it is not Lanzmann who speaks and reconstructs the Holocaust. In addition, the film contains no documentary texts or images. The Holocaust is reconstructed by its victims: perpetrators and witnesses. They are the main characters of "Shoah" and they were also the main characters of the actual Shoah. It is them who bore the testimony.

As Shoshana Felman noted, "because the testimony is unique and irreplaceable, the film is an exploration of the differences between heterogeneous points

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346 More on Lanzmann's film, See: T. Majewski, *Sub Specie Mortis. Notes on Claude Lanzmann's, "Kultura Współczesna"* 2003, no 4, p. 198-208.

of view, between testimonial stances which can neither be assimilated into, nor subsumed by one another.”<sup>347</sup> Thus, Lanzmann depicts three different categories of his interviewees who responded to his inquiry: “those who witnessed the disaster as its victims (the surviving Jews), those who witnessed the disaster as its perpetrators (the ex-Nazis); those who witnessed the disaster as bystanders (the Poles).”<sup>348</sup> These three lead parts of “Shoah” were borrowed from the fundamental classification made by the historian Raul Hilberg, the only academic expert in the film.<sup>349</sup>

As Shoshana Felman shrewdly observed, Lanzmann’s film, thanks to the distinction between the three categories of the interviewees and the penetrating questions of the director, allows the viewer to see “three different performances of the act of seeing”. Jews (victims) see, “but they do not understand the purpose and the destination of what they see; overwhelmed by loss and by deception, they are blind to the significance of what they witness.” They fail to see that the aim of their journey by cattle cars is death. Poles (bystanders), unlike the Jews, do see but, as bystanders, they do not quite look, they avoid looking directly, and thus they overlook at once their responsibility and their complicity as witnesses.” Finally, Germans see and participate but they try to hide what they see and do: make it invisible, cover it with euphemisms. They do not see bodies or people but “disembodied verbal substitute” which they refer to as “Figuren”.<sup>350</sup>

“Shoah” is a film woven with the multivoiced discourse of the survivors, perpetrators and witnesses, who speak about the Holocaust in different languages and from different perspectives. It is also woven with today’s landscapes of the places where the Holocaust happened; the remaining of ex-camps, remote areas and the silence that envelops them and creeps into the statements of the characters. The film has no soundtrack, unless the clatter of the train to Treblinka, recurring like a *leitmotiv*, can be counted as one. Consequently, Simone de Beauvoir notes: “Neither fiction nor documentary, Shoah succeeds in recreating the past with an amazing economy of means: places, voices, faces. The greatness of Claude Lanzmann’s art is in making places speak, in reviving them

347 M. Steinlauf, op.cit.,p.110

348 S. Felman, *The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah*, [in:], *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, S. Felman, D. Laub (ed.), Routledge New York 1992, p. 207-210.

349 See: R. Hilberg, *Sprawcy, Ofiary, Świadkowie. Zagłada Żydów 1933-1945*, Warszawa 2007.

350 S. Felman, *The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah*, [in:], *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, S. Felman, D. Laub (ed.), Routledge New York 1992, p. 207-210

through voices and, over and above words, conveying the unspeakable through people's expressions."<sup>351</sup>

Gesticulation and body language play an important part in "Shoah". They express emotions, and therefore arouse emotions in the viewer, which was probably Lanzmann's primary goal. Not only did he make places speak, but also people, sometimes exposing them to difficult tests. He formulated insightful questions, mostly about the feelings, thoughts, reactions and behaviour that accompanied the victims, perpetrators and bystanders while they were fulfilling the roles they were either given or chose themselves. For this purpose, Lanzmann not only asked his interviewees to visit places with him that evoked their memories, but also made some of them reconstruct and confront the past by roleplaying. "People in his film do not narrate memories but rather re-experience situations", Gertrud Koch notes. In other words, Lanzmann forced his interviewees to go through past events again, but this time in front of the camera. Jan Karski's and Abraham Bomba's testimonies prove to what extent this artistic method was successful.

However, neither the construction nor the artistic value of Lanzmann's film was discussed in the debate over "Shoah" that took place in Poland. The debaters focused only on Polish aspects of the film; precisely, on how Lanzmann presented Polish witnesses of the Holocaust and for what purpose. The film indeed includes many Polish threads: as Poland had been the main arena of the Holocaust, Lanzmann talked to its Polish bystanders. People who lived in the immediate vicinity of the Nazi factories of death saw the arriving transports and smoke rising from the crematoria; they felt its scent while cultivating their fields. The director talked to Henryk Gawkowski, a railwayman who drove trains full of Jews to the Treblinka station under German command. He also talked to farmers from Treblinka, to residents of Chelmno and asked questions to people who live today in former Jewish houses.

Almost all of his Polish interviewees were simple people who formulated their statements in a simple way. Lanzmann asked them what they had felt during the war, what their attitude towards Jews and the Holocaust had been. Answers and facial expressions were different. Some people could not hide emotions and burst into tears. Others, proud and excited about the conversation with a foreign director, smiled despite talking of terrifying things. Still others, such as a group of Chelmno residents, repeated openly anti-Semitic clichés, which resonated with those of the teachings of the Catholic Church but were far from the Second Vatican Council. Some talked about Jewish wealth and how Jews had

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351 See: Simone de Beauvoir's preface to the book with the text of Claude Lanzmann's film "Shoah". C. Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Koszalin 1993, p. 7.

exploited Poles. The only exception to this poorly educated group of the Holocaust bystanders was Jan Karski, who appeared almost at the very end of the film. Reporting his visits to the Warsaw Ghetto, he spasmodically burst into tears and overcame his emotions with difficulty. One could say that Karski was the only Polish intellectual in Lanzmann’s film, and he did not even live in Poland.

The debate over “Shoah” was difficult and complicated from the very beginning, mainly because almost nobody in Poland had seen the film, including its critics. Those who spoke publically about the film were basing their opinions only on the commentaries from the French press or repeated schematic opinions disseminated by Polish press. Thus, it was the film’s reviews and opinions rather than the film itself that shaped the social representations around which the debate revolved. Claude Lanzmann himself made the debate even more complicated and off the track by stating his opinions and reflections to the press. He suggested that the Nazis had decided to install the death camps in Poland because they had believed they could count on “Polish complicity”. He also equated Catholicism with anti-Semitism, claiming that as much as Poles were Catholics, they were also anti-Semites, for anti-Semitism was included in the teachings of the Catholic Church.<sup>352</sup> In other words, Lanzmann often said things that were untrue or half true; he also reacted impulsively and considered different opinions as insult. It was noticed even by those debaters who evaluated his film positively and wanted to separate Lanzmann’s work from his character. “Let us not believe the artist but his work” – Timothy Garton Ash asked in his review of “Shoah”.<sup>353</sup>

“Debate” is perhaps not the best word to describe the commentaries on “Shoah” that appeared in the Polish press. The majority of articles, published even before the French premiere, resembled an organised attack, or at least a long and well-thought out campaign. This campaign even preceded the Polish release of the film and was organised, as Jerzy Jedlicki noted, almost in the image and likeness of the one from 1968.<sup>354</sup> It was conducted mainly by “Trybuna Ludu”, “Życie Warszawy”, “Rzeczpospolita”, but also by specialist magazines devoted to cinematography, such as “Film”, or “Ekran”. The majority of their journalists referred to an article published by the French newspaper “Liberation”, entitled “Poland on the dock”, which included the controversial Lanzmann

352 Citation after: M. Jaworski, *Kto na ławie oskarżonych?*, “Trybuna Ludu” 20 IV 1985, p. 6.

353 T. Garton Ash, *Życie śmierci*, “Aneks” 1986, no 41-42, p. 44.

354 See: *Dyskusja wokół tekstu Abrahamama Brumberga “Polska inteligencja a antysemityzm”*, (a debate that Krystyna Kersten, Jerzy Jedlicki, Konstanty Gebert, Alina Cała, Abraham Brumberg participated in), “Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” 1997, no 2, p. 5.

quotes, and other equally schematic and one-sided publications from the French press. That famous statement influenced the critical reception of “Shoah”, which the titles of the articles clearly demonstrate: “Potwarz” [“Calumny”]<sup>355</sup>, “Shoah – skandaliczny film szkalujący Polaków – w programie francuskiej tv”<sup>356</sup> [“Shoah – a scandalous film that vilifies Poles – a French TV programme”], “Trwa antypolska kampania we Francji”<sup>357</sup> [Anti-Polish campaign in France continues”], “Antypolscy fałszerze historii” [Anti-Polish forgers of history”]<sup>358</sup>, “Obelga dla Polaków”<sup>359</sup> [“Insult for Poles”], “Film »Shoah« obelgą dla narodu polskiego”<sup>360</sup> [“The film ‘Shoah’: an insult to the Polish nation”], “Oszczyństwa przeciwko Polsce w filmie ‘Shoah’”<sup>361</sup> [Slander against Poles in the film ‘Shoah’], to name but a few.

The analysis of the majority of the articles that appeared in the aforementioned magazines demonstrates that they were in the same vein. The only differences were the levels of aggression and the fact that some of them were based not only on other people’s opinions and selected fragments from the French press, but also on the statements of foreign correspondents who had seen the film. Nevertheless, they seem to have been written according to the same pattern, which was nothing new in the communist press. Moving from the general to the particular, let us now reconstruct the objections against “Shoah”, bearing in mind that almost no one had seen the film at the time, which blinded both the offensive and defensive press campaigns.

First of all, “Shoah” was considered an anti-Polish film, one that vilified Poles and thus Poland. The word “anti-Polish”, as well as “insult”, “slur” or “slander” were key terms used to describe and review the film. The “anti-Polishness” was believed to be demonstrated in the anti-Semitic label assigned to Poles and the deliberate distortion of the image of the war to Poland’s disadvantage; in showing Poles in a bad light and portraying a biased image of World War II. Lanzmann’s film was accused of distortion of historical truth, one-sidedness and manipulation. According to the journalists, “Shoah” suggested the complicity of Poles in the Holocaust or, at least, their tacit consent. The director

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355 Z. Morawski, *Potwarz*, “*Życie Warszawy*” 2 V 1985, p. 2; (W. R.), *Potwarz*, “*Ekran*” 19 V 1985, p. 2.

356 (PAP), “*Shoah*” – *skandaliczny film szkalujący Polaków – w programie francuskiej tv*, “*Życie Warszawy*” 29 IV 1985, p. 2.

357 M. Jaworski, *Trwa antypolska kampania we Francji*, “*Trybuna Ludu*” 3 V 1985, p. 7.

358 D. Luliński, *Antypolscy fałszerze historii*, “*Trybuna Ludu*” II V 1985, p. 6.

359 (PAP), *Obelga dla Polaków*, “*Rzeczpospolita*” 6 V 1985, p. 7.

360 (PAP), *Film “Shoah” obelgą dla narodu polskiego*, “*Rzeczpospolita*” 3 V 1985, p. 1, 5.

361 (PAP), *Oszczyństwa przeciwko Polsce w filmie “Shoah”*, “*Rzeczpospolita*” 4 V 1985, p.1.

was accused of ignoring the aid provided to Jews by Poles, who sometimes paid for it with their life: in other words, of disregarding the Polish Righteous Among the Nations.

In addition, Lanzmann was accused of excessive focus on Jewish martyrdom and of the omission of the fact that Poles had also suffered during the war. Thus, he was accused of “depleting Polish martyrdom”, of questioning the suffering and heroism of Poles. Some of the more aware journalists – those who had actually seen “Shoah” – had stipulations related to Lanzmann’s choice of Polish witnesses of the Holocaust. They complained that he had chosen primitive interviewees, and not people from Warsaw or former members of the Home Army or Żegota, or the Polish Righteous. They were also displeased that his film had not included any historical sources, archival materials, or experts’ voices, etc.

The criticism and protests against Claude Lanzmann’s film were not only formulated by journalists. Some state institutions and organisations and individual, self-appointed defenders of Poland’s good name also manifested their disapproval, for example with the protest of the Presidium of the Supreme Bar Council, the veteran organisation ZBoWiD (the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy), or the Board of the Association of War Veterans of the PRL. In addition, a declaration condemning Lanzmann’s film was addressed to the French Embassy by the representatives of the Board of the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland and the Religious Association of Judaism. Needless to say, the criticism expressed by the organisations of the Polish Jews was particularly powerful because of the identity of its authors. Thus, the statement made by Polish Jews was extensively reported, and individual opinions of Jews in this matter were also published.

A “strong protest” against the film was also expressed and submitted in writing to the French *charge d’affaires* by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The letter stated, for instance, that: “(...) the film contains insinuations, insulting for the Polish nation, about the alleged complicity of Poles in the Hitlerite genocide” and called for its removal from French television. The Polish Ministry also criticised the participation of the French president and members of the French government in the premiere of “Shoah”. A journalist who commented on the statement declared that: “(...) Polish public opinion fully supports the ministerial protest, dictated by the will to defend our national dignity, against broadcasting such an abusive film, which casts aspersions on Poles”.<sup>362</sup>

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362 See: *Protest polskiego MSZ w związku z wyświetlaniem francuskiego filmu “Shoah”, “Życie Warszawy”* 2 V 1985, p. 2; *Protest polskiego MSZ przeciw filmowi “Shoah”*,

The defence of Poland's good name was not limited to official declarations. The legitimate, censored discourse also included attempts to defend the heroic-martyred image of the war, which "Shoah" had supposedly questioned. For this purpose, Lanzmann's film was often supplemented with the content that the director had allegedly ignored and its "lies" and "distortions" were corrected.

Supplementing mostly consisted of bringing up the figures of the Polish Righteous and depicting Poles as a nation that helped Jews on a mass scale and paid the highest price for their actions. The testimonies of Polish Jews who had survived the war solely due to Polish help were published, as well as information about the number of Polish trees in Yad Vashem. Polish martyrdom, silenced by Lanzmann, was also brought up. There were even suggestions that "it is a documented truth that the Hitlerite Reich gave the order for biological extermination of Poles and Jews".<sup>363</sup> While the author of this statement presented Poles and Jews as nations equally sentenced to extermination, other versions presented Poles as "second on the list."<sup>364</sup> Perhaps this was the reason why Lanzmann was accused that he had not emphasised the "Polish-Jewish war 'community of faith'?"<sup>365</sup>

The suffering Poles, fully devoted to helping Jews, and their heroic attitude in the fight against the occupier was contrasted with a completely dissimilar image of the French and France under Nazi occupation. The French were reproached for their collaboration with the Nazis, the Vichy Government, the "French Gestapo" and the fact that Marshall Petain's collaborating government had been responsible for the extermination of French Jews. French society was also reminded that their achievements in helping Jews were not comparable to the Polish ones, which was supposedly demonstrated by the disproportion in the number of trees on Yad Vashem. The Polish nation, the press reminded, had never delivered to this world any Petain or Quisling and although helping Jews had been punished by death, Poles had not hesitated to lend a hand to the dying. This contrast was clearly expressed by one of the journalists, who wrote: "the behaviour pattern of the Polish nation under foreign occupation, which is preserved in our memory and subconscious, contains three main axioms: resistance against the occupiers, protest against their policy and moral condemnation of

"Trybuna Ludu" 2 V 1986, p. 6; *Protest polskiego MSZ w związku z wyświetlaniem francuskiego filmu "Shoah"*, "Film" 26 V 1985, p. 2.

363 D. Luliński, *Antypolscy fałszerze historii*, "Trybuna Ludu" 2 V 1986, p. 6.

364 (C), *Film "Shoah" obelgą dla narodu polskiego*, "Rzeczpospolita" 3 V 1985, p. 5.

365 An "Ekran" journalist wrote about it after the broadcast of "Shoah" on Polish TV. (J.K.), *Po emisji "Shoah"*, "Ekran" 10 XI 1985, p. 4.

those who collaborate with them (...) In France, collaboration was a norm, and conspiracy, resistance and partisan movement – a violation of the norm.”<sup>366</sup>

This was not the end of the list of accusations against the French. The positive image of Poles was incomplete and the mood was not quite improved. The problem of anti-Semitism, which Lanzmann and the French press reproached Poland with, was not solved. However, the journalists defending Poland’s good name came up with a solution. They argued that France was where anti-Semitism actually ruled, where acts of vandalism were committed on Jewish cemeteries, synagogues burned and Jews lived in constant fear. Poland, on the other hand, was believed to be a place where the Jewish minority lived with a sense of security and never complained about any manifestations anti-Semitism, as they certified themselves in the press. Parenthetically, it is interesting that the example of French anti-Semitism can serve to invalidate Polish anti-Semitism.

As has been already mentioned, all the press statements were primarily intended to extract all the differences between Polish and French attitudes during the Nazi occupation. They were supposed to clearly demonstrate the Polish moral superiority, provide reasons for national pride, and thus refute the alleged charges. They also served to prove that the French had no right to make any accusations against Poland and Poles regarding the war past and anti-Semitism; particularly that no one else but Poles fought for freedom for Poland, France and other countries. Lanzmann was advised to focus on the dark side of his own nation and make their self-examination the main subject of his film.

Why did the French press accuse Poles of anti-Semitism and complicity in the Holocaust? Why was Lanzmann’s film made? To quote one of the journalists, using the well known conspiracy rhetoric: “Who gave the false testimony and why? Whose political need is this distortion of historical truth?”<sup>367</sup>

The articles that preceded the Polish premiere of “Shoah” did not fail to answer these questions. They demonstrated that both the film and the accusations against Poland by the French press had the same purpose: to ease the French conscience and draw the attention of the international public opinion away from their troublesome war heritage. Moreover, as one of the journalists suggested, the anti-Polish campaign unleashed by Lanzmann was not only a method “to divert attention from their own [French] imperfections from this period [World War II – author’s note]” but also was a “screen, behind which the contemporary

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366 Z. Orski, *Kolabo-Film czyli “panowie Francuzi, siadajcie pierwsi!”*, “Film” 30 VI 1985, p. 3.

367 (Lik.), *Cynizm po czterdziestu latach*, “Rzeczpospolita” 6 V 1985, p. 7.

ulcers of the reviving of Le Pen's brand of fascism" and "the raising wave of xenophobia, racism and homophobia in France" was to be hidden.<sup>368</sup>

There were also suggestions that "the anti-Polish film 'Shoah' seems to be an element of a larger political whole, including the falsification of history". Although the author of the statement did not specify which "larger political whole" he meant, the spirit of March '68 was definitely present in his article. Writing "Paris's flirt with Bonn is also intensifying", he followed in the footsteps of the March speakers who had informed the public about the flirtation between Bonn and Tel Aviv.<sup>369</sup> The purpose of this alleged alliance was believed to be the same as the supposed aim of Lanzmann's film: making Poles co-responsible for the Holocaust. The Paris correspondent Marek Jaworski in the daily "Trybuna Ludu" openly stated that Lanzmann's theories are "(...) simple and already well known from the enunciations of some anti-Polish, Zionist circles."<sup>370</sup> Thus, Jaworski wrote what others only implied: that "Shoah" was "yet another attempt to justify Hitlerite crimes" and an invaluable support to the efforts of West German "revanchists" and revisionists.<sup>371</sup> Similar charges had been earlier brought against Jan Józef Lipski after the publication of his essay: "Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy" ["Two fatherlands, two patriotisms"].

In this way Poles once again believed themselves to be the victims of a campaign of calumnies and insults targeted at their reputation. As that the thread of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust appeared in the public debate over "Shoah", the heritage of March '68 turned out to be alive.<sup>372</sup>

Thanks to the collective effort of journalists and writers, a negative interpretation of the film "Shoah" emerged and probably dominated the social perception of the movie. Before the Polish broadcast of the film, there were very few articles that offered alternative reviews and showed Lanzmann's work in a different light. The exceptions to the rule were Jerzy Tomaszewski's articles in "Polityka" and Artur Sandauer's texts in the same weekly, although some reservations could be made as regards the latter. Both authors had seen the film,

368 M. Jaworski, *Kto na ławie oskarżonych?*, "Trybuna Ludu" 20 IV 1985, p. 6.

369 D. Luliński, *Antypolscy fałszerze historii*, "Trybuna Ludu" 2 V 1986, p. 6.

370 M. Jaworski, *Kto na ławie oskarżonych?*, Trybuna Ludu" 20 IV 1985, p. 6.

371 (PAP), *Film "Shoah" obelgą dla narodu polskiego*, "Rzeczpospolita" 3 V 1985, p. 1, 5.

372 The president of the Polish American Congress stated: "Claude Lanzmann, a French-Jewish journalist and film-maker, significantly overlooked a crucial element which importantly influenced the tragic conclusion. It was an apparent inability of the Jewish leaders to comprehend the stark reality of the "final solution", and their virtually passive, almost fatalistic submission to the German terror. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1986-02-19/news/8601130376\\_1\\_polish-efforts-christian-poles-claude-lanzmann](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1986-02-19/news/8601130376_1_polish-efforts-christian-poles-claude-lanzmann), See: *Kongres Polonii Amerykańskiej o filmie Shoah*, "Myśl Polska" 1-15 III 1985, p. 4.

which already distinguished them from most critics. Moreover, both criticised Lanzmann for his self-flattery, arrogance and reckless public statements. However, their review of the film was positive. Artur Sandauer admitted he had seen it three times and each time he found Lanzmann’s picture shocking.<sup>373</sup> Jerzy Tomaszewski mentioned the tension that had accompanied him while watching the film, which, he believed, proved “the artistic success of the director”. He pointed out, however, that the film was not free of “obvious inaccuracies.”<sup>374</sup> Unlike Sandauer, he confined himself to this one statement.

The writings of Artur Sandauer included accusations against the film, which mainly referred to neglecting the topic of the Polish Righteous. Thus, his objections overlapped with what the press was publishing at the time. Public statements by Lanzmann and French press articles also went under Sandauer’s blade of criticism. Sandauer suggested that the director “let himself be used as a tool in a game which is not quite clean” and was under the influence of the press campaign that was evoked by his film, which was aimed at “the whole of Poland and was a part of contemporary Western policy towards us.”<sup>375</sup> In other words, Sandauer joined the choir of those who announced a hostile campaign aimed at Poles.

On the other hand, Adam Krzemiński and Jan Rem, whose articles were also published in “Polityka”, said nothing positive about Lanzmann’s film. Jan Rem – in fact Jerzy Urban, the government spokesman who used this pseudonym – criticised the picture most of all for the director’s choice of Polish witnesses. He accused Lanzmann of allowing only “not very enlightened people” to speak and presenting “an intellectual ground floor, if not a basement, of the building of Polish society”. Similarly to Adam Krzemiński, he reproached Lanzmann with bias, criticised the director for ignoring Polish help to Jews and subjecting the whole film to a theory that implied that Poles had also been responsible for the Holocaust. Urban accused Lanzmann of forgery, whitewashing the Nazis, a lack of knowledge of Polish history and “anti-Polish intentions.”<sup>376</sup> Adam Krzemiński, who, unlike Urban, had not seen “Shoah”, stated that the director “feeds his film, in cold blood, on the Polish complex of many Jews; not only to equate Polish peasants with executors but also to ignore Polish help.”<sup>377</sup>

However, it was Jerzy Urban and Artur Sandauer who spoke out about the necessity of showing the film to a Polish audience. While Urban’s intentions

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373 A. Sandauer, “*Shoah*” a sprawa polska, “Polityka” 3 VIII 1985, p. 5.

374 J. Tomaszewski, *Jom Kipur w Oksfordzie*, “Polityka” 12 XI 1985, p.3.

375 A. Sandauer, “*Shoah*” a sprawa polska, “Polityka” 3 VIII 1985, p. 5.

376 J. Rem, *Szpetni i dzicy*, “Polityka” 3 VIII 1985, p. 7.

377 A. Krzemiński, *Kadisz w Polsce*, “Polityka” 11 V 1985, p. 10.

were quite particular<sup>378</sup>, Artur Sandauer called for a national debate over “Shoah” and anti-Semitism. “To silence the debate over ‘Polish anti-Semitism’, which is unleashed from time to time in Western Europe, let us unleash it ourselves” – Sandauer wrote. “Let us act similarly toward Lanzmann’s film! Instead of letting others discuss our drawbacks, let us discuss them on our own! Let us cease to be an insular country that is not easily influenced by the opinions of outsiders! Let us not allow others to use our understatements and embarrassments! Let us get Lanzmann’s film and unleash a debate over it.”<sup>379</sup>

On 30 October 1985, right after the prime time newscast, Polish television broadcast several large excerpts of the over nine-hour film “Shoah” that concerned Polish bystanders of the Holocaust; that is, the fragments that brought the most intense emotions. The full version could be seen in few cinemas. Thus, the majority of Polish viewers saw the version truncated according to its relevance to a Polish audience and deprived of context, which must have influenced its reception and reviews. In addition, the press campaign that had been running for several months had already defined the film as controversial, seditious and infamous.

Immediately after the broadcast there was a debate in the TV studio. Franciszek Ryszka, Andrzej Grzegorzcyk, Andrzej Wasilewski, Kazimierz Kąkol, Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz and Szymon Szurmiej, a director of the Jewish Theatre, commented on Lanzmann’s picture. According to press articles, opinions presented in the studio did not falsify the objections against Lanzmann that had been raised earlier. Many of these accusations were repeated, for instance the non-representative, biased choice of Polish interviewees (only “primitive people”), or the fact of ignoring the Polish Righteous. Another repeated accusation was that the film “Shoah” had been made according to a predetermined thesis and that it had seriously deformed the history of Poland and its contemporary image. The TV debate resulted in a polemic in “Polityka”, in which Andrzej Grzegorzcyk and Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, arguing about Polish-Jewish past, formulated a few risky statements. The debate, however, avoided the main content of the film and focussed more on general topics.<sup>380</sup>

378 Jerzy Urban clearly stated that broadcasting of Lanzmann’s film in Poland could initiate a debate on anti-Semitism in the Polish Catholic Church; see: J. Rem, *Szpetni i dzicy*, “Polityka” 3 VIII 1985, p. 7.

379 A. Sandauer, “*Shoah*” a sprawa polska, “Polityka” 3 VIII 1985, p. 5.

380 See: A. Grzegorzcyk, *Kwestia żydowska*, “Polityka” 16 XI 1985, p. 6; K. Teodor Toeplitz, *To jest kwestia ideologiczna*, “Polityka” 30 XI 1985, p. 7; Z. Kałużyński, *Odmawiam przebaczenia*, “Polityka” 7 XII 1985, p. 7; A. Grzegorzcyk, *Może się dogadamy?*, “Polityka” 21-27 XII 1985, p. 7 (a polemic article, See: I. Nowakowska, *Jeszcze o “kwestii żydowskiej”*, “Więź” 1986, no 7-8, p. 94-101.)

The broadcasting of Lanzmann’s film on Polish television did not contribute to a rebuttal of the opinion distributed by “Trybuna Ludu”, “Rzeczpospolita”, “Życie Warszawy”, “Ekran” and “Film”. Most likely, it merely strengthened the belief about the harmfulness of the film and the right to raise objections towards it. Thus, objections were repeated and Lanzmann’s film was described as “a distortion of contemporary times, but first of all, a cruel, ominous and probably deliberate distortion of our occupational past.”<sup>381</sup> The distortion of the past meant ignoring Polish martyrdom and the Polish Righteous and presenting Poles as indifferent towards the Holocaust. The distortion of the present referred to Lanzmann’s selection of Polish interviewees, who represented “the darkest of mangles: a gossiping, silly, resentment-fed mangle from villages and little towns”.<sup>382</sup>

The tone of the majority of press commentaries after the broadcast of “Shoah”, even including the Catholic press, was similar. A “Wprost” journalist noted that one could get an impression that “one hand was holding all pens”.<sup>383</sup> Letters by TV viewers about the film were also similar. Anna Sawisz, who analysed these letters, concluded; “The majority of viewers who responded to the film with a letter acted according to the propagandists’ plan: they perceived it as an attack on Polish national honour, on the good name of a socialist country, etc.” She also stated that “the Jewish topic, which was the main topic of the film, was almost completely subjected to this defensive response”.<sup>384</sup>

However, even the limited public discourse included alternative receptions to the film, such as the articles of Jacek Kuroń in “Tygodnik Mazowsze” and Zygmunt Kałużyński in “Polityka”. Kuroń not only emphasised the difference between the war fates of Poles and Jews but also observed that being witnesses to the Holocaust made Poles injured and this “injury”, according to Kuroń, was well illustrated in the film.<sup>385</sup>

Zygmunt Kałużyński’s article, initially intended to contrast with Andrzej Grzegorzczak’s text, turned out to be a comprehensive, outstanding and moving polemic against the majority of objections raised toward “Shoah”. The author stated from the outset that Polish reception of the film was distorted because “at this side of the Oder we all watched this film with prejudice, nervously expecting every word, gesture and even elements of landscape as possibly insulting”.

381 (Z. M), “Shoah”, “Życie Warszawy” 31 X – 3 XI 1985, p. 7.

382 M. Misiorny, *To nie jest film o Polakach*, “Trybuna Ludu” 31 X – 3 XI 1985, p. 8.

383 W. Kosiński, *Wokół Lanzmanna*, “Wprost”, p. 31.

384 A. Sawisz, *Obraz Żydów i stosunków polsko-żydowskich w listach telewizyjnych po emisji filmu “Shoah”*, [in:] *“Bliscy i dalecy”*. *Studia nad postawami wobec innych narodów, ras i grup etnicznych*, A. Jasińska-Kania (ed.), Warszawa 1992, p. 164.

385 Citation after: M. Steinlauf, *Pamięć nieprzyswojona...*, op. cit., p. 128.

Kałużyński did not agree that Lanzmann had planned to make a film about Polish anti-Semitism. If he had pursued such a goal, he could have presented the Kielce pogrom in his film, or other anti-Semitic acts. Instead, Lanzmann took up the challenge of describing the organised process of the Holocaust. Kałużyński also noted that Poles who appeared in the film usually expressed their grief about the tragedy that had happened before their eyes. Only a minority of Polish witnesses manifested antipathy towards Jews. Thus, Kałużyński believed the insinuations about Lanzmann presenting Poles as satisfied with the Holocaust and giving their silent consent to it to be untrue. At the same time, he firmly stated that it was not Lanzmann's fault that the eyewitnesses of the Holocaust "had not been a refined society or professors from a seminary, as the train to Treblinka had not been passing next to a university."<sup>386</sup>

Underground Press also joined the debate over "Shoah". "Aneks" quarterly published a highly favourable review of the film written by Timothy Garton Ash, who, referring to the opinion of John Paul II, commented on the "great moral effect" of the film.<sup>387</sup> He did not, however, spare critical comments and disapproved of Lanzmann's awkward public statements that had influenced the reception of his work. He also referred to common objections made against the film. Garton Ash noted that "the Polish part is historically secondary", because Poles "were neither the executioners nor the main victims in the extermination camps—Lanzmann's subject."<sup>388</sup> Garton Ash, however, was probably wrong in this aspect. The role of bystanders was not belittled in the film and the Holocaust was reconstructed by the director from the perspective of victims, perpetrators and witnesses. On the other hand, he was right in saying that "Shoah does not make a historical argument about the Poles and the Holocaust, in the way that it clearly does make a historical argument about the extermination process".<sup>389</sup> Zygmunt Kałużyński expressed an analogous opinion, noting that Lanzmann's intention (as was claimed by the director himself) was not "(...) dealing with pogroms, persecutions, Jewish suffering over generations due to spontaneous impulses of hatred – but the organised, institutionalised, bureaucratic extermination committed by Nazism."<sup>390</sup>

Timothy Garton Ash also dismissed the accusations that Lanzmann's concealments were believed to distort the history of occupied Poland. The key counterargument was obviously the clearly specified topic of the film. Moreo-

386 Z. Kałużyński, *Odmawiam przebaczenia*, "Polityka" 7 XII 1985, p. 7.

387 T. Garton Ash, *The Life of Death*, *The New York Review of Books*, 19 December 1985, p. 32-75.

388 *Ibidem*

389 *Ibidem*

390 Z. Kałużyński, *Odmawiam przebaczenia*, "Polityka" 7 XII 1985, p. 7.

ver, as Garton Ash noted, Lanzmann did not mention other issues that were essential for the complete image of the Polish-Jewish pre-war past, such as the criminal Poles who blackmailed Jews (*szmalcownik*s) or the Polish “blue police” (*Granatowa Policja*). He also did not include quotations from Kazimierz Brandyś’s “Warsaw Diary” of the reprehensible things people in “Aryan Warsaw” were saying. Furthermore, there is no merry-go-round<sup>391</sup> from Czesław Miłosz’s “Campo di Fiori” and the complex issues the poem evokes.<sup>392</sup> This Lanzmann did not say, because his film is concerned with something completely different.

There is another finding by Timothy Garton Ash that is worth attention. He notes that “we recognise the nationalism of the conqueror. But there is also a nationalism of the victim that Poles and Jews seem to have in common. Characteristic for the nationalism of the victim is a reluctance to acknowledge in just measure the sufferings of other peoples, and an inability to admit that the victim can also victimise”.<sup>393</sup> This rule is confirmed in almost all debates over the Polish-Jewish past, when the “reluctance to acknowledge” is demonstrated in the power of psychological repression, relativism and denial. In the same issue of “Aneks”, Israel Shakak<sup>394</sup> and Włodzimierz Goldkorn also published their texts. Instead of their detailed analysis, I will only present one, but it is a very firm declaration by Goldkorn: “Accusations against Poles of their indifference towards the Holocaust are justified. Lanzmann’s film perfectly documents the indifference and lack of understanding of what happened. However, assuming that passivity is active compliance in crime is a mistake.”<sup>395</sup> Those who made such an assumption were the majority of Polish journalists who debated over the film, their French counterparts who drew far-reaching conclusions, and Lanzmann himself, as his public statements could suggest he considered it true. Attentive viewing of “Shoah”, however, gives no reason to think so.

The debate over Lanzmann’s film in Poland had two essential parts: before and after the television broadcasting. In the first stadium, not many participants saw the film at all; in the second, just as few wanted to prove their first opinion right. In addition, the director’s reckless statements and commentaries in the French press seriously hindered the debate and made it go off-track. Still, there were also important and brave voices in the debate, which substantially differed from the dominating review and interpretation of the film. The very fact that Polish television broadcasted fragments of “Shoah” was significant for the pro-

391 In his poem, Miłosz described the merry-go-round in Krasiriski Square, which did not stop during the outbreak of the ghetto uprising that heralded its final liquidation.

392 T. Garton Ash, op. cit., p. 49.

393 Ibidem, p. 42.

394 I. Shakak, *Normalność w nieludzkim świecie*, “Aneks” 1986, no 41-42, p. 52-66.

395 W. Goldkorn, *Sens historii i zagłada Żydów*, “Aneks” 1986, no 41-42, p. 71.

cess of reconstructing Polish memory about the Holocaust. The Holocaust and the problem of the attitudes of Poles towards it were in the centre of public attention for a while. Through television – a medium with a wider range of influence than an underground magazine for intelligentsia – Poles were confronted with a problem that had been usually disregarded.

Obviously, it would be hard to unequivocally determine whether fragments of Lanzmann's film on Polish TV did indeed spark off a heated debate in Polish society. We do not know whether the film was discussed in "hundreds of thousands of Polish homes", as Maciej Kozłowski claimed or if it "did not, contrary to the expectations, invoke passion on a tram, in a queue or in the street", which a "Wprost" journalist suggested.<sup>396</sup>

It is also difficult to determine what the reception and rating of the film were. How many Poles responded according to the expectations of propagandists who had been preparing them for their viewing of this film over the previous months? In other words, to what extent were the authors of the letters to Polish television representative of Polish society? These questions will remain unanswered. One thing is certain, however: Lanzmann's film on Polish TV managed to break the "area of silence" and directed the process of reconstructing the memory of the Holocaust into the areas that had not yet been explored. Not only did the responses to the film reveal empty spaces in Polish memory, they also outlined a map of suppressed elements in the memory of the witnesses of Shoah.

### 3. What Błoński said in Miłosz's words

As soon as the debate over Lanzmann's "Shoah" came to an end, the problem of the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust again became the subject of public inquiry due to another event. This time, it was an article by the literary critic, Professor Jan Błoński (who died in 2009), whose article "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" was published by the weekly "Tygodnik Powszechny" on 11 January 1987.<sup>397</sup> The sensitive problem was raised by a Pole, not an outside stranger whose intentions could easily be interpreted as bad. In addition, contrary to Claude Lanzmann, Błoński focused almost solely on the attitude of Polish witnesses of the Holocaust and the consequences that they experienced because of what they had witnessed. Considering the manner in which the author ap-

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396 M. Kozłowski, *Zrozumieć*, "Ogniwo" 1986, no 25, p. 26; W. Kosiński, *Wokół Lanzmanna*, "Wprost" 1985, p. 31.

397 J. Błoński, *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 11 I 1987, p. 1,4.

proached this sensitive subject, his openness and courage in presenting facts and opinions, Błoński’s article should definitely be considered groundbreaking. Thus, it is not surprising that his text and the debate over it are today considered a symbol of a shift in extracting the difficult Polish-Jewish topics from the darkness of oblivion. The significance of the article can be proven by the fact that, as Daniel Blatman noted, “it has long been a landmark in the examination of Polish-Jewish relations.”<sup>398</sup>

What did Jan Błoński write in 1987 in “Tygodnik Powszechny”? It is impossible to summarise the profoundness of his thoughts and the virtuosity of his style in two sentences. Already in the introduction to his deliberations, Błoński alluded to Czesław Miłosz’s words, whose two poems, written in the period of the Nazi occupation, “Campo di Fiori” and “Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto” [The Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto] became the key point of reference and the groundwork for Błoński’s article.<sup>399</sup> Even the title of the article referred to the second of the two poems by Miłosz mentioned above. Mentioning the poet and employing his words had a symbolic meaning. Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak noted that in the romantic tradition it was “poet: the conscience of a nation” who had the power to “notice what has been hidden from the eyes of the community and his moral dilemmas deserve attention.”<sup>400</sup> Thus, Błoński began his article with Miłosz’s words of the duty of Polish poetry to purge the burden of guilt from our native soil, which is – in his words – “sullied, blood-stained, desecrated”.<sup>401</sup>

It is hard to disagree with Błoński’s words that Miłosz did not mean Polish blood because “one can only be held accountable for the shedding of blood which is not one’s own. The blood of one’s own kind, when shed by victims of violence, stirs memories, arouses regret and sorrow, demands respect.”<sup>402</sup> Miłosz also did not mean the blood of the occupier, because “killing when in self-defence is legally condoned.”<sup>403</sup> What he meant was “Jewish blood, the geno-

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398 D. Blatman, *Were These Ordinary Poles?*, “Yad Vashem Studies” 2002, no XXX, p. 67.

399 Both poems were written by Czesław Miłosz in 1943, during the occupation. They were published e.g. in the “Ocalenie” volume.

400 E. Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Świadkowie Zagłady – Holocaust jako zbiorowe doświadczenia Polaków*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny”, p. 189.

401 All quotations are from Jan Błoński’s essay “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”. Fragments of Czesław Miłosz’s poems and statements are quoted after Jan Błoński. See: J. Błoński, *The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*, <http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/eehistory/H200Readings/Topic4-R1.html>

402 Ibidem

403 ibidem

cide which – although not perpetrated by the Polish nation – took place on Polish soil and which has tainted that soil for all time”.<sup>404</sup> Not only did Błoński call to remember the shed Jewish blood that had belonged to the former residents of the collective Polish home, he also called to cleanse and clarify the Polish collective memory of Jews and the Holocaust. Memory is at the core of our identity: “We cannot dispose of it at will, even though as individuals we are not directly responsible for the actions of the past”, Błoński wrote. “We must carry it within us even though it is unpleasant or painful”, he added. If, then, the Jewish blood “has remained in the walls, seeped into the soil” and “has also entered into ourselves, into our memory”, then “we must cleanse ourselves, and this means we must see ourselves in the light of truth.” This is how Błoński interpreted Miłosz’s words and this was the postulate he formulated in his introduction: without it, “our home, our soil, we ourselves, will remain tainted.”<sup>405</sup>

In the later part of his article, Błoński demonstrated how difficult this cleansing was and what barriers it met on the way. He used a well-known poem by Czesław Miłosz, “Campo di Fiori”, which depicts the indifference of Polish society toward the hell of the ghetto residents and about the “dying alone” which “the poet’s word” will bring back to memory. The symbol of this loneliness and indifference was the merry-go-round in Krasiriski Square, which did not stop during the outbreak of the ghetto uprising that heralded its final liquidation.<sup>406</sup> What Błoński meant, however, was not the actual content of the poem but rather the mental discomfort of its author. As Czesław Miłosz wrote, the poem was about “the act of dying from the standpoint of an observer” and hence the poet considered it “very dishonest”. Błoński agreed with this observation, writing: “the piece is so composed that the narrator, whom we presume to be the poet himself, comes off unscathed. Some are dying, others are enjoying themselves, all that he does is to ‘register a protest’ and walk away, satisfied by thus having composed a beautiful poem. And so, years later, he feels he got off too lightly.”<sup>407</sup>

The barriers and difficulties of the already mentioned “cleansing” were illustrated not only by the poet’s dilemma. Błoński demonstrated them mainly by reconstructing an imaginary conversation between two people about anti-Semitism and the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust. The pattern of the conversation, constructed by Błoński, was based on almost ritually repeated ar-

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404 ibidem

405 ibidem

406 About the symbolism and history of the merry-go-round, see: T. Szarota, *Karuzela na Placu Krasirskich. Studia i szkice z lat wojny i okupacji*, Warszawa 2009.

407 Czesław Miłosz wrote “Campo di Fiori” while witnessing the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and its liquidation. These were the events that inspired him.

guments, accusations, rationalisations and denials. In short, the author created a standard model of conversation based on the common experience of discussing Polish-Jewish topics. Anyone who has ever participated in such a conversation, particularly if asked about Polish anti-Semitism by a foreigner, will probably find him or herself as the interlocutor in Błoński’s dialogue. Certainly, they will also be able to imagine the content and course of the conversation. Błoński recapitulated this half-imagined, half-real conversation writing: “And so on, indeed, endlessly” and suggested that academic debates resembled this discussion. What is the most important, however: according to Błoński, the inability to discuss Polish-Jewish relations in a meaningful and constructive way results from the burden of guilt Miłosz wrote about.

Jan Błoński referred to Czesław Miłosz’s poetry once more in his text. This time it was a poem written during the occupation, entitled: “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto”. The poem is very metaphorical, odd and, one might even say, psychedelic. It begins with the image of the destruction of a city. The poet is as if in its ruins, under the ground, among buried human bodies, when a weird figure appears; a “guardian mole” who is boring a tunnel with a torch fastened to his forehead: “He touches buried bodies, counts them, pushes on. He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapour/ The ashes of each man by a different part of the spectrum.” The poet fears the “guardian mole” and confesses his fear: “I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole/ He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch/Who has sat much in the light of candles/Reading the great book of the species./ What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament/Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?/Broken body will deliver me to his sight/And he will count me among the helpers of death:/The uncircumcised.”

Obviously, everyone has a right to their own interpretation of this terrifying poem by Miłosz. Everyone can also give an individual answer to the question of who the “guardian mole” is. However, for the purpose of this book, it is only Błoński’s interpretation that is necessary. Miłosz himself suggested that the “guardian mole” had Jewish features and Błoński did not fail to note it. In Błoński’s opinion, there are two fears in the poem. First is the fear of death in a similar way to those buried alive in the cellars of the ghetto. In other words, it is the “Poor Christian’s” fear of the same fate that Jews suffered. But there is also a fear of the guardian mole. Who is he, according to Błoński, and what does the fear of him represent? Błoński’s answer is fundamental: “This mole burrows underground but also underneath our consciousness. This is the feeling of guilt which we do not want to admit”. The fear felt by the “Poor Christian” is “muffled, hidden even from himself--he feels the fear that he will be condemned (...) It is the mole who condemns him, or rather may condemn him, this mole who sees well and reads 'the book of the species'. It is his own moral conscience that

condemns (or may condemn) the poor Christian. And he would like to hide from his mole-conscience, as he does not know what to say to him.”

Having said so, Błoński came back to his imaginary conversation about Polish-Jewish relations, Polish anti-Semitism and the attitude of Poles towards the Holocaust. He came back to point out that the arguments of the Polish interlocutor revealed the same fear that troubled the “Poor Christian”. It was the fear that he might be counted among the helpers of death by the “guardian mole”. This fear, according to Błoński, is so strong that we do everything possible not to let it out, or we dismiss it. It manifests itself in the Polish-Polish and Polish-Jewish discussions on the subject of anti-Semitism or the Holocaust. If only some event or fact “puts us in a less-than-advantageous light”, “desperate attempts to minimise it, to explain it away and make it seem insignificant” start to emerge. This is because we greatly fear accusations. “We fear that the guardian mole might call to us, after having referred to his book: ‘Oh, yes, and you too, have you been assisting at the death? And you too, have you helped to kill?’ Or, at the very least: ‘Have you looked with acquiescence at the death of the Jews?’”

However, anyone who believed that Blonski had accused Poles of complicity in the Holocaust would be wrong. Blonski only wanted to say that we – Poles – do everything we can not to confront these questions for the sake of our good name and the good name of our nation. We dismiss them as “unacceptable” although they have to be asked. Once they are asked, we have the answers and rationalisations ready: everything for the sake of our national good name. Analysing Polish-Jewish past, “we want to derive moral advantages from it. (...)We want to be absolutely beyond any accusation, we want to be completely clean. We want to be also--and only--victims.” This concern is, however, Błoński continued, “underpinned by fear--just as in Milosz's poem--and this fear warps and disfigures our thoughts about the past”, which is “immediately communicated to those we speak to”. Therefore, “we prefer not to speak of it all” or “we speak of it only in order to deny an accusation”. It will not be easy, however, to get rid of the fear of the guardian mole, which is drilling the conscience. Exorcisms will not help whatsoever. Neither can we get rid of the fear – Błoński noted – “by forgetting about the past or taking a defensive attitude towards it”. He firmly stated that “we must face the question of responsibility in a totally sincere and honest way” although “it is one of the most painful questions that we are likely to be faced with”. And Błoński did face it. He also postulated that we should imitate the way the Catholic Church had dealt with their own attitude towards Jews and stop “haggling, trying to defend and justify ourselves”, “stop arguing about the things that were beyond our power to do, during the occupation and beforehand”. We must stop, Błoński demanded, and “place blame on political, social and economic conditions”. We must honestly answer the question: did

Poles jointly and severally help Jews during the Holocaust when the Nazis were killing them in front of their eyes? How many were quietly satisfied? How many helped the occupiers? How much did the pre-war anti-Semitism influence later indifference? We must frankly answer these questions and many others, such as those concerning the postwar violence experienced by the Holocaust survivors in Poland. In other words, according to Błoński: “instead of haggling and justifying ourselves, we should first consider our own faults and weaknesses. This is the moral revolution that is imperative when considering the Polish-Jewish past. It is only this that can gradually cleanse our desecrated soil.” Thus, Błoński postulated that we should acknowledge and confess our blame. He also asked himself the question that the guardian mole prompted: “Full responsibility? Also a shared responsibility for the genocide?”

Błoński’s answer was partly close to Karl Jasper’s idea of “metaphysical guilt” that he presented in his famous essay: “The question of German guilt” – but only partly. Błoński did not say anything about Polish complicity and none of his words entitles the reader to draw such conclusions. He spoke, however, of our “shared responsibility”. Here is what he exactly said:

My answer is this: participation and shared responsibility are not the same thing. One can share the responsibility for the crime without taking part in it. Our responsibility is for holding back, for insufficient effort to resist. Which of us could claim that there was sufficient resistance in Poland? It is precisely because resistance was so weak that we now honour those who did have the courage to take this historic risk. It may sound rather strange, but I do believe that this shared responsibility, through failure to act, is the less crucial part of the problem we are considering. More significant is the fact that if only we had behaved more humanely in the past, had been wiser, more generous, then genocide would perhaps have been 'less imaginable', would probably have been considerably more difficult to carry out, and almost certainly would have met with much greater resistance than it did. To put it differently, it would not have met with the indifference and moral turpitude of the society in whose full view it took place.

According to Błoński, this shared responsibility does not relate only to Poles but also to all Europeans and the whole Christian world. Shared responsibility is our common responsibility. However, it falls on Poles in particular, for it was in Poland where the greatest number of Jews lived and where the main arena of the Holocaust was located by the Nazis, which consequently made Poles direct witnesses. Therefore, Błoński wrote of himself and his countrymen: “we had the greatest moral obligation towards the Jewish people. Whether what was demanded of us was or was not beyond our ability to render, God alone must judge

and historians will continue to debate. But, for us, more than for any other nation, Jews were more of a problem, a challenge that we had to face”.

Almost at the end of his article, Jan Błonski, who called the Polish pre-war anti-Semitism “particularly virulent” asked yet another important question: did it lead us to participate in genocide? The negative answer he gave finished the article and was as crucial as the idea of shared responsibility that Błonski outlined. Here is what he wrote at the end:

No. Yet, when one reads what was written about Jews before the war, when one discovers how much hatred there was in Polish society, one can only be surprised that words were not followed by deeds. But they were not (or very rarely). God held back our hand. Yes, I do mean God, because if we did not take part in that crime, it was because we were still Christians, and at the last moment we came to realize what a Satanic enterprise it was. This still does not free us from sharing responsibility. The desecration of Polish soil has taken place and we have not yet discharged our duty of seeking expiation. In this graveyard, the only way to achieve this is to face up to our duty of viewing our past truthfully.

These long quotations from Błonski’s article, as well as their detailed analysis were intended to demonstrate the ground-breaking status of the essay, which was published in 1987. It was ground-breaking because Błonski bravely raised a moral problem that was important for Poles and offered a completely new way of discourse related to Polish-Jewish relations; his article became a catalyst for the process of reconstruction of Polish collective memory about Jews and the Holocaust. This was because the author went far beyond schematic rules of the propagandist public discourse and changed the direction of the debate. He neither accused nor defended. He never accused Poles of complicity in the Holocaust, which happens sometimes in the West, but neither did he limit his considerations to an apotheosis of the Polish Righteous. He did not give a false impression that most Poles provided aid to Jews. He also did not try to hide the indifference of Polish bystanders behind the trees of Yad Vashem. In addition, he never depicted the image of the pre-war Poland as a Polish-Jewish idyll and heaven for Jews. In short, Błonski did not soothe the national conscience by saying the Jewish problem did not exist as Polish problem.

On the contrary, the author pointed at the moral significance of the attitudes of Poles to the Holocaust and to Jews, before and after the war. “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto” leaves no doubt that dealing with the moral problem recognised by Błonski, which had not been discussed or analysed, poses a significant challenge for Polish society to face. Hence, Błonski’s language – which Michał Głowiński noted twenty years later – was “neither the language of accusation nor of apology (...) nor the language of a polemic with accusations nor polemic

with apology. (...) He consequently used the language of morality to discuss the problem of Polish-Jewish relations.”<sup>408</sup>

The “language of morality”, proposed by Jan Błoński, and the content of “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”, written in this language, met diverse social response. Since then, Błoński’s attitude and perspective have had epigones as well as critics, who consider the essay to be an example of detrimental historical determinism. As one can easily guess, almost immediately after its publication, in January 1987, those who regarded the taboo-breaking article as unjust, unfair and seditious spoke with a loud voice. This was also the tone of opinions expressed in the official communist press. The journalists who formulated them unanimously repeated almost all of the accusations that had earlier been made against Lanzmann for his film “Shoah” and Jan Józef Lipski for his essay “Two Fatherlands, two Patriotisms”.

Leaving their detailed reconstruction aside, it is enough to say that Błoński’s essay was first of all seen as departing from the historical truth, undermining the difficulty of living conditions under the Nazi occupation, belittling their martyrdom and disregarding the heroism of Poles who commonly provided aid to Jews. Critics noted that the image of Polish-Jewish relations, which had been good for years – Poland had been the mythical *Paradisus Judaeorum* – was completely falsified in the article. Błoński was accused of burdening Poles with the responsibility for the Holocaust and thus favouring West German “revanchists” who, according to the propagandist enunciations, still wished to classify Poles as the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Additionally, the word “anti-Polish” was endlessly repeated in the public discourse and became a very useful term to describe the crime of the author and his work.

It was not the communist press that became the main arena of the very emotive discussion that Błoński’s essay had provoked. The debate was held mainly in the Catholic press, mostly in “Tygodnik Powszechny” weekly, which had published “The Poor Poles”. After publication, many letters arrived to the editorial office, which inclined the chief editor, Jerzy Turowicz, to state that no other problem had evoked such a lively response.<sup>409</sup> Needless to say, from all the letters sent to “Tygodnik Powszechny”, not each and every opinion was published. Moreover, not every author agreed with the content of “The Poor Poles”. According to Jerzy Turowicz, who recapitulated the discussion, the majority of letters and articles expressed “a critical stance towards Błoński’s statements”.<sup>410</sup>

408 M. Głowiński, *Esej Błońskiego po latach*, “Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały” 2006, no 2, p. 15-16.

409 J. Turowicz, *Racje polskie i racje żydowskie*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 5 IV 1987, p. 1.

410 Ibidem

A significant example of a publically expressed critical opinion was an article by the lawyer Władysław Siła-Nowicki, which can be, with high probability, considered the representative voice of the vast majority of Polish society. According to Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlik, the letters to “Tygodnik Powszechny” can demonstrate that the readers strongly backed Siła-Nowicki in his polemic with Błoński. It is thus worth considering what Władysław Siła-Nowicki wrote in his article, entitled: “Janowi Błońskiemu w odpowiedzi” [In Response to Jan Błoński].<sup>411</sup>

In an annotation to the article by Władysław Siła-Nowicki, the editors of “Tygodnik Powszechny” distanced themselves from its content, noting that: “a number of theories included in this article are at least debatable” and that the author “interpreted the article “Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto” too one-sidedly. Indeed, the article contained things one might want to isolate oneself from. In the first words of his polemical text, Władysław Siła-Nowicki stated that Błoński’s text may be interpreted as an unintended “approval and quintessence” of the incessant “anti-Polish propaganda” led by the enemies of the whole Polish nation more than the enemies of the government and the system. He also perceived the publication itself as very dangerous because of the sources of the validation of Błoński as an outstanding literary critic and the fact that his essay was published in an important Catholic magazine. “God, forgive him for he knows not what he does” – lamented Władysław Siła-Nowicki over what Błoński and the magazine did.

Władysław Siła-Nowicki accused Błoński of a far-fetched over-interpretation of Miłosz’s two poems and of using the poet’s words for an unmerited cause. He also did not like the fact that Błoński used the first person plural and spoke in the name of the nation as the collective subject. In the opinion of Władysław Siła-Nowicki, Błoński should have spoken “in his own name”, considering that the language he used was the language of “mortal enemies and slanderers” of the community he addressed and in the name of which he spoke. Nowicki regarded Błoński’s views as “dangerous and harmful” and contrasted them with his own vision of Polish-Jewish relations in the interwar period and in occupied Poland.

According to Władysław Siła-Nowicki, Poland had always been a tolerant country, which is why so many Jews had lived there before the war. However, they lived their lives in separation from Poles and their isolation was by their own choice, dictated by the need to preserve their autonomy and identity. According to Władysław Siła-Nowicki, Jews, forced to live in diaspora, had to

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411 All the quotations can be found in the article and the editorial: W. Siła-Nowicki, *Janowi Błońskiemu w odpowiedzi*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 22 II 1987, p. 3.

“maintain their separateness”, “create their own community” and love it more “than the host community.” They also had to care about the interests of this community in the first place if they wanted to ensure its duration and continuity. Siła-Nowicki “knew from experience” that there had been hardly any anti-Semitism in pre-war Poland and that Jews had immaculate living conditions. He also never came across the venomously anti-Semitic journalism that Błoński had described. Although Siła-Nowicki admitted there had been incidents of feuds, he also claimed they had resulted from the great number of Jews and the conflict of interest. He denied the words of Błoński, who said that Jews had been treated as “second category citizens”, and maintained that their situation had been very good. For instance, Jews dominated wholesale and retail trade, controlled “a disproportionate part of wealth”, and had better access to education than city citizens: the percentage of Jews with secondary and tertiary education was higher than the percentage of educated Poles (in relation to the number of Jews and Poles respectively). Jews also dominated certain professions, particularly those relating to law (barristers) and medicine (doctors).

According to Władysław Siła-Nowicki, all the above-mentioned facts must have inevitably led to conflicts and indeed they did. The author was “disgusted” at the anti-Semitic incidents at Polish universities, ghetto benches, *numerus clausus* and *numerus nullus*, but, as he stated, they were only “a frolic, child’s play” in comparison to what was happening in Germany at the time. Besides, one could end up “in the can” for such behaviour. By the way, Siła-Nowicki considered these discriminatory practices as somehow “natural” for “a society to defend itself against the numerical domination of its intelligentsia”. In other words, according to the author, these incidents had not stemmed from anti-Semitism but necessary defence and national instinct for self-preservation.

When the Nazi occupation started, Polish and Jewish communities had not been living together but next to each other. According to Siła-Nowicki, this was a result of the Jewish tradition of integrism and isolationism, which they had cultivated after hundreds of years of living in diaspora. The author added that the two communities adopted two completely different attitudes towards the occupier. Poles created an underground state, devoted themselves to active, military resistance against the Nazi, and, full of dedication, gave their lives for their country. Jews, on the other hand, were failed by their own self-preservation instinct as they sought rescue in passiveness and submission to the restrictions imposed by the occupiers. They did not shoot at Germans or at Jewish police in ghettos; they did not attempt to escape, being escorted from “this town or another” to railway stations “by a few, sometimes six, sometimes four guards armed with ordinary rifles”. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was their only heroic act. Jewish passiveness, according to the author, was “the first and key obstacle that

prevented Poles from helping Jews”. Nevertheless, even if Poles could hardly do anything to help Jews, they did everything they possibly could.

In sum, Władysław Siła-Nowicki regarded all of Błoński’s statements as unjustified and he rejected the “language of morality” proposed by the critic. He copied the same defensive stand of the imaginary, schematic dialogue described and undermined by Błoński in his essay “The Poor Poles...” Not only did Siła-Nowicki not notice anything inappropriate or incriminating about pre-war anti-Semitism, he even claimed it had never existed. He also denied the indifference of the majority of Polish society towards the Holocaust, arguing that we helped Jews as much as we could. In contrast to Błoński, who never attempted to soothe the national conscience but called for examination of it, the words of Siła-Nowicki confirmed the Polish conviction that their nation was immaculate. “I am proud”, he wrote, “of my nation’s stance in every respect during the period of occupation and in this I include the attitude towards the tragedy of the Jewish nation. Obviously, attitudes towards the Jews during that period do not give us a particular reason to be proud, but neither are they any grounds for shame, and even less for ignominy. Simply, we could have done relatively little more than we actually did, including the attitude to the tragedy of the Jewish nation.” Those who should be ashamed, according to Władysław Siła-Nowicki, were the Jews from the United States, who remained passive and indifferent in the face of the horror experienced by their brothers, and not the Poles who struggled, suffered and gave aid to Jews to the best of their abilities. Siła-Nowicki eagerly appreciated the war martyrdom of his own nation and accused Błoński of depicting only its alleged flaws and defects while ignoring its suffering and heroism.

The polemic article of Władysław Siła-Nowicki, an educated man, a barrister in political trials and a declared anti-communist was (and still is) an illustrious example of the stereotypical thinking about Polish-Jewish topics. Its content clearly shows how deeply and strongly these stereotypes have been rooted in mentality and language; how significantly they influence the way people think about these issues. It also demonstrates that education does not impregnate the immensity of this influence.

Needless to say, the language used by Władysław Siła-Nowicki was not new. It belonged to the repertoire of the nationalist Right, who had spoken it particularly loudly in the interwar period. Siła-Nowicki had then made a name for himself as a journalist of the “Prosto z mostu” magazine, which had not avoided anti-Semitic content. However, it is easy to notice that his style and arguments corresponded with the nationalistic and anti-Semitic tone in which the communists had used when referring to the Polish-Jewish themes, and which had been present in the public discourse for some time. However, Władysław Siła-Nowicki was never influenced by the corrupting communist propaganda.

Michał Głowiński brilliantly noted that although the author “wrote according to rules shaped by the nationalist Right, he used his own language” and did not need to borrow from anyone. On the contrary, it was communist authorities who, for some time, had been taking over “the rules of the rightist discourse and, consequently, its obligatory thinking patterns”. In other words, the style and arguments used by Władysław Siła Nowicki were very similar to what the official press was publishing at the time because communists had taken over the rhetoric that was typical for nationalist thought”.<sup>412</sup>

Siła-Nowicki’s article met with a favourable response from the majority of the readers of “Tygodnik Powszechny”, who wrote letters to the weekly expressing their opinion on the matter. The 180 letters sent by the readers were analysed by Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak in her master thesis. The authors were usually well educated and for various reasons interested in the subject of Polish-Jewish relations during and after the war. Koźmińska-Frejłak divided the letters into two categories: “pro-Błoński” and “pro-Siła-Nowicki” and demonstrated significant differences between the authors’ perspectives regarding Polish-Jewish relations during the Nazi occupation. Błoński’s advocates accepted the language of morality and ethic that he had proposed. They perceived the Holocaust as a singular and unprecedented event in the history of humankind. They were also ready to acknowledge and confess the Polish guilt related to Jews, and never denied it. They agreed with the image of the Polish-Jewish past presented by Błoński. The protagonists of Władysław Siła-Nowicki, on the other hand, took a completely different approach. It is important to note, however, that this group was less homogenous and the argumentation (or its style) varied to some extent. Nevertheless, they mostly refused to acknowledge Shoah as a particular or distinctive event. Moreover, they interpreted Błoński’s essay as anti-Polish and dangerous for the Polish reason of state. They strongly rejected the suppositions and arguments of the author and disagreed with his key conclusion. In addition, they presented a completely different image of the Polish-Jewish past. They also took the defensive position that Błoński had criticised when he wrote: “instead of haggling and justifying ourselves, we should first consider our own faults and weaknesses”.<sup>413</sup>

Siła-Nowicki’s text met with a critical response from other participants in the debate held by “Tygodnik Powszechny” on Błoński’s essay. Suffice to say

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412 See: M. Głowiński, *Esej Błońskiego...*, p. 18-19.

413 See: E. Koźmińska-Frejłak, *Polsko-żydowskie rozrachunki wojenne. Wyzwania Holocaustu. Analiza listów do redakcji “Tygodnika Powszechnego” nadesłanych w odpowiedzi na dyskusję Błoński-Siła-Nowicki*, maszynopis, Instytut Socjologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1992.

that Kazimierz Dziewanowski fiercely criticised the polemical language of Siła-Nowicki.<sup>414</sup> Stanisław Krajewski noted that Siła-Nowicki was “insensitive to the Jewish fate” and “guarding Polish honour, settled himself into the defensive position”.<sup>415</sup> Jerzy Jastrzębowski decided that the outstanding lawyer had failed to understand the “language of morality” proposed by Błoński and also did not notice either the significance of the moral attitude Błoński postulated nor the necessity of moral revolution that Błoński proclaimed.<sup>416</sup>

Teresa Prekerowa, the author of a number of important publications regarding the help given by Poles to Jews during the war, also took the floor. In her objective and fact-based polemic, she demonstrated how modest the scale of this help had been and what a minimal part of Polish society had been involved in it. She asked rhetorically: “Does the achieved result – 2% of the society [who helped Jews: author’s note] allow one to claim that ‘we could have done relatively little more than we actually did?’ I have considerable doubts.” Teresa Prekerowa also wrote about the indifference of the majority of Polish society towards the Holocaust and noted various manifestations of the disgraceful attitudes of Poles to Jews during the war. In addition, she reviewed the stereotype of Jewish passivity, which she found comfortable but fundamentally wrong. Moreover, Prekerowa called this accusation of passivity “stern”, as it was formulated by a society that valued resistance to violence very highly and that made it its national feature.<sup>417</sup>

The abovementioned critics of Władysław Siła-Nowicki’s text acknowledged and respected Błoński’s article even if they did not agree with every single statement it included. They agreed, however, that Błoński raised an extremely important subject and identified a problem that had not been openly named so far, broke the conspiracy of silence and violated a national taboo. Stanisław Salmonowicz described the essay “The Poor Poles” as “bitter” but “hugely important” and, similar to other debaters who accepted the “language of morality” proposed by Błoński, developed some of the author’s ideas and argued with others.<sup>418</sup>

Janina Warlewska presented a similar opinion in a very personal article, in which she wrote about her dilemma between the standpoint of Siła-Nowicki and Błoński. The dilemma was whether to take a defensive position or to confess to

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414 K. Dziewanowski, *Proszę nie mówić za mnie*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 5 IV 1987, p. 2.

415 E. Berberysz, *Czarna dziura*, rozmowa z S. Krajewskim, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 5 IV 1987, p. 4.

416 J. Jastrzębowski, *Na różnych płaszczyznach*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 5 IV 1987, p. 5.

417 T. Prekerowa, *“Sprawiedliwi” i “bierni”*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 29 III 1987, p. 3.

418 S. Salmonowicz, *Głębokie korzenie i długi żywot stereotypów...*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 8 II 1987, p. 4.

complicity and the sin of omission. Warlewska finally decided on the latter.<sup>419</sup> Ewa Berbyreusz took a similar position, thanking Błoński for making her realise her complicity with more clarity. She finished: “I accept the message of the article: let us stop haggling about extenuating circumstances, let us stop arguing and bow our heads instead.”<sup>420</sup>

The article that finished the debate over Jan Błoński’s essay in “Tygodnik Powszechny” was Jerzy Turowicz’s “Racje polskie i racje żydowskie” [“Polish arguments and Jewish arguments”]. The chief editor summarised the main threads of the discussion, which included readers’ letters. At the same time, Turowicz did not avoid presenting his own opinion about Błoński’s article, which he regarded as “not only right but also very necessary”. He disagreed with the accusations of its “anti-Polish” character and defended its main arguments. In addition, he explained the meaning of the term “shared responsibility” used by Błoński, which had been often wrongly interpreted as acknowledging Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Turowicz also denied the sameness of the war fate of Poles and Jews, which had been often suggested and not only in this particular debate. He did not share Siła-Nowicki’s peace of mind regarding the non-existence of pre-war anti-Semitism and that Poles did everything they could to help Jews.

However, Turowicz also had reservations regarding Błoński’s words: “if we did not take part in that crime [the Holocaust – author’s note], it was because we were still Christians”, God held back our hand”. Turowicz considered these words to be an unfair and undeserved accusation, because, he stated, “Despite everything, there was no possibility of our complicity in the genocide. However, it does not mean that the problem of shared responsibility did not exist”.<sup>421</sup> By the way, Jan Błoński explained a few times that he acknowledged his mistake for using metaphors to describe a sensitive matter instead of formulating his thought precisely.

This one and only bone of contention did not influence the general, high opinion of Turowicz regarding “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”. Turowicz was in fact one of the most devoted advocates of Jan Błoński in the course of the debate. Closing the debate in “Tygodnik Powszechny” Turowicz wrote: “and if our whole discussion contributes to a collective examination of conscience, to rejection of the belief that since we were victims we are innocent, if it helps to deepen our moral sensitivity, it will mean this discussion was necessary. The

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419 J. Walewska, *W jakimś sensie jestem antysemitką*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 5 IV 1987, p. 3.

420 E. Berbyreusz, *Wina przez zaniechanie*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 22 II 1987, p. 3.

421 J. Turowicz, *Racje polskie i racje żydowskie*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 5 IV 1987, p. 1, 4.

change of mentality and attitudes achieved in this way and the new awareness of the problem will help to develop Polish-Jewish dialogue. The aim will be better communication, elimination of prejudice and misunderstandings. (...) That is why – despite the claims of some of our readers – we will sometimes write about the Polish-Jewish and Christian-Jewish problems in ‘Tygodnik Powszechny’”.<sup>422</sup>

As Antony Polonsky noted, “Jan Błoński’s article ‘The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto’ sparked off what has certainly been the most profound discussion since 1945 of the Holocaust in Poland.”<sup>423</sup> It demonstrated how deeply the anti-Semitic clichés and the stereotypes about Polish-Jewish relations were rooted in the Polish language. It also revealed serious distortions of Polish collective memory, which had established themselves over the previous decades. In other words, the debate disclosed the “hidden complex of the Polish mind”, as Andrzej Bryk called the difficult “Jewish question”,<sup>424</sup> it revealed what it was and where it was located. At the same time, it demonstrated that few members of the Polish intelligentsia were able to speak the language proposed by Błoński and respond to the challenge of the “moral revolution” he postulated, cease the never-ending haggling and bidding and “consider our own faults and weaknesses.” Apparently, the Polish intelligentsia were not yet prepared for such a step, although the first wise and important voices could be heard. One way or another, Jan Błoński started a debate on the shared moral responsibility of the Polish nation regarding the Holocaust. Thus, he was the first to expose himself to attacks and judgements by the “true Poles”, whose rhetoric, in its unmodified version, makes itself felt even today whenever the topic of the difficult Polish-Jewish past appears in a public debate. Błoński’s essay undoubtedly has been essential for the modern history of our conscience.

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The last decade of the People’s Republic of Poland included various attempts to break the long and bothersome silence on Jews, the Holocaust and the Polish-Jewish past. One could notice manifestations of this complex process of memory reconstruction in bookshops, where academic literature on the subject, memoirs of the Holocaust survivors and books evoking the pre-war world of Polish Jews appeared on the shelves. To some degree, the state’s monopoly on the organisation of the commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was

422 J. Turowicz, *Racje polskie i racje żydowskie*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 5 IV 1987, p. 4.

423 A. Polonsky, *Introduction* [in:] *My Brother’s Keeper. Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, A. Polonsky (ed.), Routledge, Oxford 1990, p. 1.

424 A. Bryk, *The Hidden Complex of Polish Mind* [in:] *My Brother’s ...*, p. 171.

broken and the alternative commemorations should certainly be seen as meaningful events. Activists of Polish democratic opposition demanded that the Holocaust and its victims be remembered. So did John Paul II, whose words spoken during the visit in Auschwitz were indeed groundbreaking. Polish intellectuals also gave their opinion in brave essays in which they dealt with the difficult problem of anti-Semitism and the attitudes of Poles to the Holocaust.

The most important events regarding the processes of the reconstruction of the memory of Jews and the Holocaust were certainly the first, timid public debates over Lanzmann’s film and Blonski’s essay. It is easy to notice, however, that apart from the attacks before and after the premiere of “Shoah”, their range was limited. The debate was held by the same intellectuals who also read the essays of Aleksander Smolar, Jerzy Jedlicki and Jan Józef Lipski. Therefore, it is impossible to agree with a journalist of “Trybuna” who stated over a decade after the publication of “The Poor Poles...” that it had sparked “a national debate on the Polish-Jewish relations during the Hitlerite occupation”.<sup>425</sup> In the ruling political regime, a national, common debate including various social environments was simply impossible. Nevertheless, the discussions described above are undeniable proof that such a debate could, in a limited way, take place at the time. They also demonstrated that the most important obstacle preventing Poles from facing their pre-war attitude to Jews and the attitude of Polish society to the Holocaust were mental barriers and prejudices.

In the last decade of the People’s Republic of Poland, there was a breaking of the conspiracy of silence and the first symptoms that signalled the important process of the reconstruction of the Polish memory of Jews and the Holocaust appeared. Inauguration of this process undoubtedly took place thanks to a group of Polish intellectuals who made a brave attempt to face the difficult heritage of the Polish-Jewish past. The communist political elite did not participate in the process but neither did they block it, which the debate over Błoński’s essay in “Tygodnik Powszechny” can prove. In addition, the broadcast of “Shoah”, a film that reminded Poles of the Holocaust and presented its Polish witnesses, would not have been possible without the consent of Polish authorities.

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425 A. Budzyński, *Potrzeba innej odwagi*, “Trybuna” 24-25 III 2001, p. 14.

