

Review of the doctoral thesis “The Trauma of the Holocaust as a Post-Traumatic Phenomenon in Isreal-Poland Relations in the Years 1989-2020”

by Lior Lewkowicz - Shenholz,

written under the academic supervision of Dr. Rafał Witkowski Prof. UAM.

Contemporary studies of Holocaust memory have developed rapidly and cover a very wide range of topics, from the implications of the Second World War experience and racism in the United States or South Africa to the presence of the Holocaust in the digital media space¹. The work under review represents these current research trends by bringing together the political and artistic implications of Holocaust remembrance through the example of two countries for which the subject of the Holocaust has remained an important element of public debate for years.

The dissertation is conceptually divided into three main parts, which differ significantly in the type of their narrative and form of analysis. The first part focuses on the history of Polish-Jewish relations and their historiographical interpretations (chapter two). The core of the work is formed by chapters three and four, which deal respectively with Polish-Israeli relations 1989-2020 and with artistic representations realised in the 2000s and linked to the memory of Polish-Jewish relations. In addition, the whole work is preceded by a short but interesting chapter of a general nature devoted to historiography (which, in my opinion, is a kind of introduction to chapter two). The work opens with a relatively short introduction ('Preface') and closes with Chapter 5 ('Epilogue: What

¹ See, inter alia, J. V. Evans, E. Fagen, M. Lundrigan, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Mediascape*, Bloomsbury Academic 2023; *The Holocaust as Active Memory: the Past in the Present*, eds. M. L. Seeberg, I. Levin, C. Lenz, Routledge 2013; Z. Kekesi, *Agents of Liberation: Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Art and Film Documentary*, CEU Press 2015; Mikel-Arieli, Roni. *Remembering the Holocaust in a Racial State: Holocaust Memory in South Africa from Apartheid to Democracy (1948-1994)*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022

effective memory work can do to improve relations between Israel and Poland and between Jews and Poles').

The Author's main objective is to analyse the presence of Holocaust memory in relations between Israel and Poland in the thirty-year period 1989-2020. In particular, the doctoral student asks about the relationship between the political processes taking place in both countries and the transformation of Holocaust memory in the context of dialogue between them. I find this aim of the thesis fully justified and very ambitious. This is because the dissertation seeks to shed light on a relationship that has changed over time. It has undergone several radical changes, and it has been determined by extremely complex and constantly redefined historical experiences. The multiplicity of perspectives and methods of analysis mentioned above therefore seems to be a response to the need to show the complexity of this situation. This approach does not belong to comparative research, but rather to the history of interconnections. Perhaps, then, a good framework for conceptualising this problem at an analytical level would be an *entangled history* perspective that focuses on the very diverse interconnections between societies. Indeed, it would make it possible to fit the relationship between Poland and Israel into the complex puzzle of social memory. Of course, this is not the only possible solution. The Author has chosen a different path and, on a theoretical level, has opted for the framework of collective memory. The starting point of the consideration is the assumption of the fundamental role played by the events of the Second World War in the public discourses of both countries.

The work by Lior Lewkowicz - Shenholz is therefore part of the field of reflection on the social and political relations between Israel and Poland and, more generally, between Poles and Jews after 1989. Moreover, it undoubtedly represents another voice in the discussion of the history of the Holocaust, including, above all, the attitude of Poles towards Jews under German occupation. Finally, the Author describes himself as a researcher of memory, and collective memory is the theoretical basis of the work. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the work is least concerned with the trauma of the Holocaust and the post-traumatic phenomenon. Apart from considerations of the film, there was no in-depth analysis of the experience that would point to trauma in the sense that social psychologists talk about it in the context of the past. So I read trauma as a kind of metaphor or buzzword that evokes the experience of war and the Holocaust, but I think

it has no deeper analytical implications. And this is my main objection to the methodological assumptions and the consistency of the content of the work with its title.

As I mentioned earlier, a characteristic feature of the work is the great diversity of research perspectives and analytical methods used. The differences between the chapters can even be seen at the narrative level. The relational and distanced narrative in the chapter on political relations, for example, contrasts with the analytical, in-depth, sometimes highly emotional approach to filmmaking in both countries.

A very extensive introduction, a kind of summary of the history of the Jews in the Polish lands, might be considered unnecessary in the context of the manuscript. However, in my opinion, it provides interpretations of Polish-Jewish relations in the past that are important from the perspective of the whole work and that differ from the Polish-centred historiography by emphasising the formation of the modern Jewish nation and the role of religion in the nation-building process. This is particularly evident in the extensive section on the development of the Zionist idea and movement (pp. 56-69). According to the Author, it was necessary to outline a broad background, especially with regard to the development of Jewish life in the Polish lands before the Second World War. It is necessarily quite general, but with a clear thesis of the special role of spontaneously developing political movements. In the case of the history of the Holocaust and the case of Jedwabne, however, it is worth to add the research studies which now show in great detail that the murder committed by the Polish inhabitants of the town against their neighbours was only one example of a whole chain of events which took place in this region. The details of the murder should not be described as "controversial" (p.81), but one can only point out that they may be considered "controversial" in some circles. The data collected by the researchers who have followed Gross's lead are now fully accepted from the point of view of mainstream historiography.²

² E.g. *Around Jedwabne (The Case of Jedwabne)*, ed. Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, vol. I, *Studies*, 524 pp., vol. II, *Documents*, 1035 pp., Warsaw: Publishing House of the Institute of National Remembrance - Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation 2002.

The third chapter on Polish - Israel relations deals with the political and academic narratives that, in the author's view, have marked the main line of public debate on the mutual relations between the two countries. This is an important part of the work, which brilliantly illustrates the arguments and tensions raised by the memory of the Second World War. It might be worthwhile to look more closely at the reasons behind the steps taken by right-wing politicians on both sides, who ultimately decided to deviate from their previously unequivocal views on the past. On the other hand, I must admit that perhaps this would cause the work to lose its character as an analysis of the debate on the memory of the Second World War and become a political study of diplomatic games. The work shows that the relationship between the two right-wing governments was a kind of dance on ice, in which the primary value was to maintain the historical status quo of national history, but that mutual diplomatic relations (including with the US) were important enough to make some final decisions about concessions on issues of memory. The question of identity versus purely utilitarian treatment of the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust by decision-makers is still open. Although the Author tries to analyse political (inter-state) relations and academic narratives separately, it is clear that the two spheres strongly interact. The skillful linking of these spheres is, in my opinion, a crucial asset of this part of the work.

The final analytical part of the dissertation is devoted to artistic representations of Jewish-Polish relations in the 2000s, and since much space is devoted to film, it can be assumed that it touches upon the collective perceptions of the past of both nations. It has been possible to point to joint artistic initiatives and to analyse films ('Past Life' and 'Demon') made in each country, which are the most prominent examples of the 'settlement' trend. At the same time, the author's declaration that they are meant to "represent the spirit of the time and the spirit of relations between the two countries in those years" seems incomprehensible. The Author has already shown that relations changed dramatically in the 2000s, so what spirit is he referring to? In the case of Polish cinematography, it is possible to point to a whole series of film productions made in the decades in question, which clearly idealise the attitudes of Poles during the Second World War. They also represent 'something' of the spirit of that time.

It is difficult not to agree with the general conclusion that sums up the work (chapter five): the analysis of the variable political, academic and artistic links proves the close link between the institutional relations between the two countries (at governmental, military, parliamentary and academic levels) and the grassroots initiatives. This link was clearly visible from 2018 onwards, when the deterioration of diplomatic relations between the two countries and the language of hate spread by the governments of both countries at the time led to a significant decline in such projects. However, in my opinion, an analysis of many of the initiatives cited in the work shows that the situation is much more complex. In addition, the results of the analysis may be somewhat distorted by the choice of cases analysed. The huge *museum boom* that took place in Poland around the year 2007 has created a new map of discourses about the past (or rather, it has significantly expanded the existing one) in which the past of Polish-Jewish relations plays a very important role. This *museum boom* was largely controlled by the government (because it was financed with public money). It is therefore surprising that the Author focuses in this context on a small private museum, or rather, an educational centre - the Galicia Jewish Museum, located in Krakow's Kazimierz district and founded on the initiative of the British photographer Chris Schwartz. How can this museum be compared to a branch of the Krakow Museum: the Schindler Factory, to the Ulm Museum in Markowa, which is the source of enormous public debate, or to the Polin Museum in Warsaw? I understand that the Author's intention was to show small grassroots initiatives, but the work lacks the location of this museum on the museological map of Poland, which would allow us to better understand the Author's criticism of a small photographic exhibition in relation to the practices of remembrance in Poland. Why should it be representative of these practices? The interpretation of the meanings conveyed by the exhibition should also, in my opinion, be more contextualised. A visit to the Galicia Museum is usually part of a tour of Małopolska, the centrepiece of which remains the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Museum, together with a visit to Kazimierz as the centre of the history of the heritage of Krakow's Jews (including the Old Synagogue Museum) and the Płaszów Ghetto site (with the Schindler Factory). I don't know whether such a shift in emphasis can radically change the interpretation of the photographs, but it would not be out of the question to consider the visitor's point of view as well.

Apart from the main question concerning the issue of trauma and post-trauma, which was not used as an actual analytical tool, I would like to point out here that a certain drawback from the perspective of the expectations we place on doctoral theses is the construction of the narrative by citing very extensive excerpts from sources, above all speeches by politicians and comments by participants in the debate, which gives it the character of a descriptive work and less of an analytical one. The Author often leaves the reader with a quoted event or a very interesting text accompanied by only a few sentences of commentary. In a similar way, a narrative is built around the key concepts and theses of the work. Such an approach seems to be particularly acute in the conclusion, where, instead of a conclusion, the Author invokes another concept from 'the toolbox' of the memory historian, i.e. 'memory work'. And this time we are again confronted with quotations from the work of experts: Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, Yifat Gutman or the article by Wagner-Pacufuci and Barry (pp. 204-205). The Author thus seems to hide behind the experts' voices.

On a minor note: there is an assumption in the abstract of the thesis which, in the context of the entirety of the doctoral student's reflections, does not seem justified. First of all, I refer here to the claim that "political moves supposed to be rational and free from any elements of irrelevant sentimentality" (p.4). Analyses of the world of politics nowadays ask us to abandon liberal narratives about politics as a sphere of competing rational interests. Many scholars point out that emotions have played and continue to play a significant role in politics³

Conclusion

In spite of the polemical or critical remarks and reservations mentioned above, I would like to emphasise that the thesis is an interesting study that deals with an important historical and cultural problem in the relations of two states and nations. The doctoral candidate undoubtedly possesses the ability to carry out independent scientific work on the basis of various types of historical sources, using methodological knowledge.

³ See, for example, *Politics and Emotion. The Obama Phenomenon*, eds. Marcos Engelken-Jorge, Pedro Ibarra Güell, Carmelo Moreno del Río, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften | Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, Wiesbaden 2011.

The Author also has the ability to formulate an interesting research question and knowledge of a wide range of literature on the issues addressed, not only in the Israeli and Polish contexts. In my opinion, the reviewed dissertation meets the requirements for doctoral theses, as specified in Article 187 of the Law on Higher Education and Science of 20 July 2018, and I request that the doctoral student Lior Lewkowicz - Shenholz be admitted to the next stage of the doctoral thesis.