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## Assimilation into Exile: The Jew as a Polish Writer

Zygmunt Bauman

*Leeds*

**Abstract** This essay explores the history of Jewish assimilation in the West, which partly defines itself against the stereotype of the unassimilated *Ostjude*, the Jew of Central European origin. The cultural significance of the disappearance of Central European Jewry is considered before the essay moves on to the status of the Jew as Polish writer. It foregrounds the creativity, rich but uneasy, arising from the Jewish adoption of the Polish language as a refuge. Jewish poets figure the Polish language as a shelter, thus countering the inner tensions of an assimilatory project. Jews preserving their traditional ways reinforce their estrangement from Polish national ambitions, but assimilation itself generates a threatening ambivalence in the eyes of the Polish host. Acceptance into the Polish nation that is conditioned upon assimilation comes to be a contradiction in terms. The essay concludes that while assimilation was generated by the painful external pressures of Jewish exile, it was also filled from within by an ethical urge, exemplified here in the writings of Julian Tuwim, Adolf Rudnicki, and Julian Strykowski.

To be in exile means to be out of place; also, needing to be rather elsewhere; also, not having that “elsewhere” where one would rather be. Thus, exile is a place of compulsory confinement, but also an unreal place, a place that is itself out of place in the order of things. Anything may happen here, but nothing can be done here. In exile, uncertainty meets freedom. Creation is the issue of that wedlock.

What makes the exile an unreal place is the daily effort to make it real—that is, to cleanse it of all things that are out of place. In exile, one is

pressed to stop being in exile; either by moving elsewhere, or by dissolving into the place, not being anymore out of it. The latter is the pressure of assimilation. To be like anyone else. Not to be odd anymore—to renounce one's nonidentity, that is, to renounce one's identity in the name of a new identity, which would be nonidentity.

Not all assimilation is tragic, nor is all culturally creative. As a matter of fact, the opposite seems to be the case—and ever more so, as throughout the Western world the crusading spirit of nationalism dissipates into vague historical memory and do-it-yourself, and shop-supplied and personally assembled identities replace the etiological myths of common fate, blood, soil, and collective missions. The daily life of assimilation is dull and uninspiring. It is hardly a source of agony and certainly not a stimulus to iconoclasm and intellectual adventurism. With the exit of the tragedy and cruelty of politically inspired homogenization, the cultural explosiveness of the assimilatory context is all but gone.

For the great majority of diasporic Jews, comfortably settled now in the middle classes of their respective countries—local, yet not militantly parochial—assimilation means no more than keeping up with the Joneses. *Thou shalt not step out of line with thy neighbor* is assimilation's sole commandment—one easy to observe, as Cynthia Ozick caustically commented, by “rushing out to buy a flag to even up the street” (1984: 159). Assimilation has dissipated in a general conformity of public appearances peacefully cohabiting with a variety of privatized contents. Overt conformity is all the easier to maintain, since diversity (particularly as long as it remains unobtrusive) has been recognized as the foremost of personal virtues, a duty and a pride. Amid the cornucopia of class, generational, occupational, or just socially unattached, freely wandering lifestyles, it is difficult to set apart, as a special challenge, such forms of life as may be ethnically rooted and thus subject to other, more worrisome rules than the rest of the manifold dimensions of diversity. The memory of past uniqueness survives, if at all, in the older and fast-aging generation's occasional hiccups of shame and embarrassment. On the whole, it seems, attention is focused, undramatically, on the efforts of affluent Jewish residents of suburbia to “be like” the rest of the affluent residents of suburbia, the efforts of Jewish youth to absorb and replicate the up-to-date lifestyle of the young, of Jewish professionals to live and dress and decorate their offices in the way right and proper for professionals of their standing, of Jewish academics to act in accordance with the latest campus fashion.

The sting has been taken out of assimilation not because the Jews have performed what assimilation ostensibly pressed them to perform, but because the pressure is not there anymore—in this late modern, or post-

modern, world of universal particularity; a world integrated through its diversity, a world little worried by difference and resigned to ambiguity.

The agony and the splendor of assimilation was a relatively brief, and relatively localized, episode in the history of the modern world. It encompassed a few generations spanning the stormy, short period needed for modern states to entrench themselves in their historically indispensable, yet transitory, nationalist forms. It also encompassed just a few generations thrown into the cauldron of seething nationalist passions; generations already cut off from their roots but yet unabsorbed by the new compound; generations forced to stretch themselves to the utmost, to build from scratch a domicile that others around them thought of as something one normally inherits. It is of such generations that Kafka spoke as four-legged animals (truly, they would not pass muster as humans by the standards then in force), whose hind legs had already lost touch with the ground while the forelegs sought a foothold in vain. The empty, extraterritorial space in which these "men without qualities" were suspended felt like an uncanny mixture of paradise and hell: the paradise of infinite chances, the hell of infinite inconclusiveness. For a few generations, the travelers—forced to take off, prohibited from landing—had no other abode. The agony and splendor of assimilation was confined to that brief flight through the world of nonidentity. Enticed, blandished, or coerced to take to the air, the flyers—whether keen or reluctant—made easy prey for gamekeepers and poachers alike. But they also enjoyed the brief privilege of that vast and sharp vision called, with a touch of awe and jealousy, the "bird's eye view."

### **The Afterlife of Assimilation**

Two events, both closely related to the outbreak, fifty years ago, of World War II, are universally admitted to weigh heavily on contemporary Jewish identity.

The Holocaust has never moved far from the center of contemporary Jewish consciousness. It is as if the collective memory of the wounded nation followed Elie Wiesel's injunction: "Anyone who does not actively engage in remembering is an accomplice of the enemy" (1977: 16). There is wide (if incomplete) agreement that the Holocaust could not but leave its imprint on the meaning of Judaism. For some contemporary theologians, like Richard Rubenstein (1966), the Holocaust marked the failure of God, of the Jewish exilic tradition, of the centuries-long customary strategies of Jewish survival, and thus opened up an altogether new era in which Jews must learn to exist in the absence of God and without the habitual and trusted grounds of secure identity. For others, like Emil Fackenheim, the

Holocaust has proved once and for all that the flight from Jewish destiny is impossible. To embrace that destiny has also become a Jewish *moral* duty. The Jews "are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish. . . . They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish" (1970: 84). However strong their dissent on this and other points, most writers agree that the Holocaust was a watershed not only in *Jewish* history. If anything, it brought the Jews closer still to the ethical center of the world at large, as living witnesses to the dark underside of modern civilization. Because of the Holocaust, Jews are people with a new mission: they are the carriers of the truth that humanity would otherwise be liable to forget at its moral and physical peril.

Whether praised or censured, revered or berated, the State of Israel and all its works provide the reference point for present-day Jewish identity. Zionism "has become the underlying ideology of the diaspora Jews—an ironic success, since classical Zionism argues for *shlilat hagolah*." For most Jews, "a sovereign Jewish state is a necessity for the Jewish people as a whole"—even if not for them personally (Biale 1986: 190, 188). The State of Israel is now that fate to which Jewish identity has given itself (or was given away) as a hostage. Like all fate, it cares little about the feelings of its hostages. The best and most ethically sensitive among the latter, like Gershom Scholem, have been acutely aware of the severe test to which the creation of the state had put Jewish history. Having asked "whether or not Jewish history will be able to endure this entry into a concrete realm," they soon found that the state's "presumptive demand that its mundane interests should be identified with moral precepts" were "manifestly impossible" (Scholem 1971: 36; 1982 [1976]: 297). And yet like all fates, the State of Israel is unlikely to loosen its grip over the hostages. The hostages would not permit it to be broken, nor would they *be allowed* to break it if they tried.

By comparison with these two events, the consequences of the third—the disappearance of Central European Jewry—are somehow off-center. More often than not confined to commemorative rituals, memory of Central European Jewish history is seldom contemplated in terms of its cultural significance. And yet it is difficult to overestimate the profundity of change in the meaning of Jewishness, and in the role of Jews in contemporary culture, brought about by the tragic death and dissipation of Central European Jews. It is still to become fully evident and fully fathomed. It is perhaps too early yet for a complete assessment. The best one can do at the moment is to sketch some of the most salient areas in which the disappearance of Central European Jewry changed the context of Jewish existence and the Jewish political and cultural role.

Elsewhere (Baumann 1991), I have discussed the role played by, or as-

signed to, Central European Jewry (under the stereotypical name of the *Ostjude*) in the assimilatory processes in Western Europe. “Though both groups called themselves Jews, they none the less encountered each other within a framework of cultural stereotypes and ideological preconceptions,” wrote Ritchie Robertson, summing up a century of uneasy coexistence (1988: 87). Even such an encounter was, however, limited. During the era of assimilation, Western European Jews—whether calling themselves “German,” “French,” or “English”—were preoccupied more with acceptance by their own respective national hosts than with other branches of the diaspora. Loyalties and cultural orientations followed the general European tendency of the nationalist age in enclosing themselves within the boundaries of nation-states. And yet the encounter with Eastern Jews could not be avoided altogether, however much their assimilated cousins in the West found it inconvenient and embarrassing. Successive waves of anti-Jewish persecution by the late-arriving and thus particularly virulent East European nationalisms, combined with deepening poverty in the undeveloped region of a rapidly modernizing Europe, lay behind a steady stream of Jewish immigration to more secure and prosperous parts of Europe. In Jack Wertheimer’s apt assessment, “The newcomers threatened to revive an image of the Jew that natives had worked so hard to obliterate” (1987: 160).

The reaction of the affluent elites of the West to this threat was swift and often verging on hysterical. In France, for instance, the various strands of the Jewish establishment joined ranks with native anti-immigrationists in an effort to stem the influx (according to an official statement published by the Alliance Israélite Universelle) of “these contemptible people” who, like Bedouins, moved their tents about with complete indifference; while the Paris Comité de Bienfaisance spared no effort to repatriate the orientals back to where they belonged, or pass them over to less inhospitable places, but at any rate out of France (Marrus 1971: 160–70). In England, in March 1871, the *Jewish Chronicle* noted with satisfaction “a very material increase” in the number of poor Jewish immigrants “who have left this country to seek subsistence elsewhere” (Fishman 1975: 64–65). One of the first steps taken by the newly formed Jewish Board of Guardians was to allocate £50 (a huge sum at the time, and a deep hole in the Board’s meager budget) to post notices all around the Russian pale discouraging immigration to England. As Eugene C. Black commented in his recent study, “After half a century of almost unbroken, if slow, success, Jewish leaders perceived their work endangered” by these distant cousins of “bizarre appearance and bad habits” (1988: 285). In November 1904, British Jewish leaders convened a European conference dedicated to moving the Jews escaping Russian per-

secution away from Western Europe. To the great relief of the gathering, a shipping company had been found which not only offered cheap fares and kosher food, but promised to sail directly to America without touching England on the way (ibid.: 292).

To Western Jews, it seemed that the final success of their own assimilation, just around the corner, was systematically thwarted if not prevented altogether by the influx of backward and uncivilized Jewish masses virtually untouched by the "process of enlightenment" and still sunk in the "superstitions" whose memory the "more advanced" sections of Jewry tried hard to wash out. Indeed, as David Feldman has recently rediscovered, "some of the greatest efforts of Anglo-Jewish institutions were spent in preventing migrants from settling in Britain" (1989: 209). What was true of Britain was equally applicable to France or Germany (though in the last case all efforts were bound to remain inconclusive because of the *Drang nach Osten* tendency of the expansionist German state).

When finally breaking through the barricades erected by state powers with the eager help of their loyal Jewish subjects, the immigrants were subjected to a zealous "civilizing" drill. In practice, that meant a concentrated effort to instruct the newcomers in the ways of their new countries and in how to shed both the spiritual traditions and the visible behavioral symptoms of their past identities—to make them, in other words, English, French, or German, just like the elites of the established Jewish communities. It is in the context of that effort that the stereotype of the *Ostjude*, that virtual inner demon of Jewish assimilation, was born and derived its vitality. The stereotype served as a genuine storehouse for all those "shameful and disgracing" aspects of Jewish identity, all those best-forgotten attributes of the recent past, which the native nationalist elites had stamped as alien and alienating. The assimilation-induced *shame* of one's own unreformed identity was displaced as the *embarrassment* felt at the sight of the close kin's otherness. Ever-renewed embarrassment did not allow the shame to die out, but it deflected the most painful assimilatory pressures and indefinitely postponed the moment of truth. Despite the facts of the matter, one could go on believing that assimilatory diligence would have been rewarded in full if not for the influx of the "aliens" who put off the moment of completion. One could, in other words, go on trusting the sincerity of assimilatory promise and believing in its ultimate success.

The civilizing mission aimed at the East and Central European immigrants, and the phantom of the *Ostjude* that haunted Western Jewry's still insecure sense of achievement, were the twin sources of the continuous vigor of assimilatory efforts. The very existence of Central European Jewry added to the inherent inconclusiveness of assimilation, keeping as-

simulation on the agenda and stimulating the never-ending search for the “right strategy.” It had decisively contributed to the emergence of “assimilation by other means”—among which socialism and Zionism enjoyed pride of place. For many an educated and assimilated Jew barred from prestigious positions and rejected by the native elites, joining the socialist movement was the shortest and most realistic way to the status of “man as such”; what the ultimate revolutionary goal of socialism promised in the distant future, the spirit and daily practice of the ostensibly nonnationalist and nondenominational movement delivered right away. As for Zionism, it was the improbability of an early fulfillment of the assimilatory project, in view of the sheer size of backward East European Jewry, which inspired the idea of a “Jewish national home” where the unassimilated sections of European Jewry could be shuffled away. According to David Biale, for Theodor Herzl the “problem” was the population of poor, mostly East European Jews; in Herzl’s pre-Zionist phase, it was the poor who were expected to emigrate (Biale 1986: 132). With the poor and uneducated Jews out of reach and out of sight, the established West European Jewry (so it was hoped) would be able to enjoy the fruits of its assimilation, while at the same time performing its own civilizing mission among the residents of the distant “Jewish national home.”

It seems that with the disappearance of a massive, “substandard” East European Jewry, many sources of the past assimilatory zeal, as well as of the urgency with which “alternative ways of assimilation” were sought, have now dried up. There is no reminder of the “shameful past” around, no cause for embarrassment. The fullness of assimilation is not subjected to a permanent and never-conclusive test. There is no reason now to look desperately for solutions to a problem that local, established, and orderly national societies cannot accommodate. Weaker than before is the stimulus for the Jewish intelligentsia to seek a revolutionary transformation of society, or to escape from the inhospitable “great society” into the alternatives offered by movements of dissent. And whatever the habitual rhetoric, the Jewish state must claim the attention and interest of diaspora Jewry on other grounds than that of a substitute solution to otherwise insoluble domestic problems. All in all, much of the inner fire of the assimilatory dream and practice has been, for the time being at least, extinguished.

Another profound effect of the extinction of East and Central European Jewry is a drastic change in the social structure of diaspora. The East European ghettos were the main—and seemingly inexhaustible—suppliers of the Jewish working class and the Jewish poor in general. Whatever the official versions, the influx of East European paupers confronted affluent West European communities with a class as much as a cultural problem.



The established elites had to gain class domination as much as cultural hegemony over the immigrants. And the immigrants were resisted both as conveyors of alien, incomprehensible habits and customs and as class adversaries and exploiters. If, in the view of the elites, class conflict seemed to dissolve in the struggle for cultural domination, from the vantage point of the immigrant poor, cultural resistance was a weapon in the continuing and all-absorbing class resistance. For all practical purposes, the defense of indigenous Jewish tradition and the pursuit of class interests looked like two sides of the same coin. Hence the phenomenon of *Jewish socialism*, not to be confused with the sociologically distinct phenomenon of participation by Jews (mostly Jewish intelligentsia) in the socialist movements of the host nations. In the historical episode of Jewish socialism, loyalty to traditional Jewish culture was a breeding and battleground of class struggle, and class resistance against Jewish capitalists involved a defense of Jewish language, beliefs, and customs.

There was, we may say, a continuity between the growing rebellion of the poor against the rising class division and exploitation inside the Jewish community of arrival, and the interest of the Jewish poor in socialism, which offered a class-oriented interpretation of their misery, complete with a clear prescription for its relief. In a sense, the socialism of the Jewish poor was a struggle to redefine (not to abandon) the Jewish tradition in terms better attuned to the position of the Jewish masses amid an increasingly capitalist environment. This is how Aaron Lieberman, the first Jewish socialist who began his lifelong romance with socialism in Lithuania and later brought the good tidings to the Jewish poor of London and New York, defined his credo in 1875:

Socialism is not alien to us. The Community is our existence; the revolution—our tradition, the commune—the basis of our legislation as quite clearly indicated by the ordinances forbidding the sale of land, by those on the Jubilee and sabbatical years, on equal rights, fraternity, etc. Our ancient Jewish social structure—anarchy; the real link between us across the surface of the globe—internationalism. In the spirit of our people, the great prophets of our time, such as Marx and Lassalle, were educated and developed. (Quoted in Frankel 1981: 33)

Similarly, Abraham Rosenberg, the president of the ILGWU, could not find a better way to express his feeling at the sight of the great walkout of the New York cloak makers in 1910 than to recall the scene which “must have taken place when the Jews were led out of Egypt” (quoted in Sorin 1985: 82). Gerald Sorin has recently estimated that over half of American Jewish socialists “were consistently, unambiguously, and often assertively identifying as Jews. An additional 16% were imbued with a ‘dual orien-

tation'—with some degree of Jewish consciousness peacefully coexisting with the belief that Jews will gradually acculturate" (ibid.: 119).

Even when the logic of the socialist project to which they dedicated their lives led them to renounce all particularism and parochialism, including their national varieties, and assert instead the universality of human values and the homogeneity of the human species, they tended to construct their new "general human" identities by using thoroughly Jewish symbols, such as displaying the nonobservance of divisive rules as prescribed by Jewish religious authorities. Even in this negative way, their socialism was given shape and expression by the community in which they grew up and with which—if only by opposition—they identified.

Thus, paradoxically, Jewish socialism constituted another challenge to the dominant—bourgeois and educated—version of Jewish assimilation; it either rejected assimilation altogether, or promoted an alternative understanding of assimilatory strategy and purpose that was hardly acceptable to the Jewish elite. By the very fact of its opposition, Jewish socialism obliquely kept the assimilation drama on stage. It was another badge of Jewish distinctiveness. It drew even further away the fulfillment of the assimilatory dream and therefore, inadvertently, even further stimulated the assimilatory effort. With the traditional tributaries of Jewish socialism all but dried up, another powerful stimulus of the assimilatory drama ground to a halt.

The third and perhaps decisive blow to assimilatory zeal has been delivered by the dissipation of that unique social/political/cultural Central European setting which originally gave Jewish assimilation its romantic appeal and bore responsibility for its tragic course. East-Central Europe was a cauldron of conflicting nationalist pressures and demands. Facing the tasks typical of the "primitive accumulation of legitimacy," and unsure of their grounding and chance of survival, the old and new nationalisms of the area were particularly vicious and ruthless—all the more so because hardly any of their claims went uncontested. As the mutually contradictory national ambitions could not be placated simultaneously, and surrender to one of the many nationalist calls meant necessarily antagonizing all the others, groups located at the receiving end of conflicting claims (*all* conflicting claims at once), that is, the groups without prospective homelands of their own, found themselves in an unenviable position: they were doomed no matter what they did. If they tried, obligingly, to uproot themselves, they ended up in the void, as no other soil was willing to accept them. If they stayed rooted in their own tradition, they were classified as weeds overdue for extermination. Since no progress in acculturation was assessed as satisfactory, each generation felt as if it were starting its work

from scratch, as if the road covered by its predecessors did not count and no lasting rights were ever to be earned. Above all, since even a tiny step toward an *approchement* with one of the competing national cultures meant antagonizing the rest, assimilation threatened to earn the Jews more enemies than friends.

This situation generated a great deal of human misery, yet simultaneously made the assimilatory episode into a period of unprecedented cultural creativity and spiritual discovery. East-Central European Jewry, which bore the brunt of that misery and offered most of that creativity, is no more (though this statement can at any moment be belied; one cannot forget the continuing copresence of great numbers of Jews, and of unsated, yet mutually incompatible nationalisms, frozen in their "prehistoric" stage on the vast expanses of the European part of the former Soviet Union). With the departure of East-Central European Jewry, Jewish assimilation lost much of its animus and drama.

In the West, where today most of the Jews live, the era of militant nationalisms, of modern states cultivating and deploying nationalist sentiments as instruments of sociopolitical control and integration, or cultural crusades and state-managed homogenizing pressures, is in all probability over. We are witnessing a double erosion of the powers and ambitions of the national state. There is, first, a pronounced tendency toward the transfer of state sovereignty to poorly coordinated supranational or international agencies, which by no stretch of the imagination can claim national sources of legitimation, and which do not need national loyalty as a guarantor of effective action. There is, second, a tendency to limit and undermine the power of the national state from below, through a growing scope of regional self-management, of ethnic and religious self-determination, and of cultural autonomy. What we are witnessing, in other words, is the progressive separation between nationhood and societal powers; a sort of *denationalization* of the state. Nationhood is fast shedding much of its past political significance, and is shifting from the area of political rule and control to a predominantly cultural function.

As the assimilatory pressures recede, so peters out the urge to assimilate. There are few rewards for the dissolution of communal identity, and too high a price to pay for the loss of an important and generally valued resource of self-construction. Homogeneity and cultural facelessness, as it were, are today decidedly out of fashion. Once particularity (and preferably, uniqueness) has become the only universally praised universal attribute of humans, all serious concern with assimilation acquires a curiously archaic flavor. It seems that in the postmodern atmosphere of the West the only place where assimilation can live is in historical memory. As

Milton Himmelfarb has observed, Jewish distinctiveness, once disdained as "parochial," may now "go from pejorative to honorific. If that happens, it will be helped along by the spectacle of Jews who understood all the particularisms—black, Chicano, Welsh, Basque, Breton, Palestinian—except the Jewish" (1973: 62). The perpetual wanderers can now settle down—in a universal otherhood.

### The Haunted Lands

Where once the Central European Jews lived, Jewish gravestones slowly disintegrate for lack of grieving descendants to tend them. The corpses beneath the gravestones have not truly been put to rest, however, in the haunted memories of the then-witnesses, now survivors.

From time to time, in a desperate yet vain attempt to exorcise the ghosts of murdered neighbors, great hearts repent for the sins of the silent and indifferent ones. Polish poet Jerzy Ficowski confesses that repentance will never be final in the haunted land:

I'd wish to be silent  
But keeping silence, I lie  
I'd wish to walk  
But while walking, I trample

Czeslaw Milosz bemoans the guilt that, even if not earned, cannot be washed out:

What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament,  
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?  
My broken body will deliver me to his sight,  
And will count me among the helpers of death:  
The Uncircumcised.  
(Milosz 1988: 65)

The crimes could be individual and private, but the guilt is collective and shared. The survivors are guilty, and their guilt is their survival. This is not a guilt that will be recognized in any human court of justice. But then moral conscience cannot be exonerated by human courts. In the words of another Pole, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, only those who lost their lives can say that they have done everything they could.

No evidence of innocence will ever argue a guilty conscience away. The Polish-Jewish scholar Emanuel Ringelblum, writing in hiding shortly before his deportation to a death camp in April 1943, left a balanced picture of Polish reactions to the rounding up and mass murder of their Jewish neighbors:

The attitudes of the Poles to Jews were not uniform. . . . Polish fascism, embodied in an excrescent, bestial anti-Semitism, created conditions unfavorable to saving the Jews massively murdered by German, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Latvian SS men. . . . Taking into account special conditions in Poland, we must admit that the acts of Polish intelligentsia, workers or peasants who do hide the Jews are exceptionally noble, loyal to the spirit of tolerance which permeated Polish history. (1988: 176–77)<sup>1</sup>

Each Jew who survived can recite a long list of Poles who helped him, often putting their own lives at risk. And each Jew who survived will never forget those countless unknown enemies whose hatred or greed made an act of heroism out of the helpers' human impulse. Those who died will never, of course, give us the count of weeping, joyful, or cold eyes that watched their last journey. On the other hand, all such counting, even if possible, would not help much. The stubborn fact cannot be wished away: a great nation, which for eight hundred years shared the glory and the misery of Polish history, was rounded up and murdered, and its death was not prevented. This means guilt. One may try to argue the guilt away; rational arguments can be advanced that the potential rescuers stood little chance of success, and stood a huge chance of adding their own lives to the millions that perished. But *rational* arguments cannot absolve a *moral* guilt.

"It is too late; this linen will never be washed clean," wrote Polish writer Andrzej Kusniewicz. And because it will never be washed clean, it is unlikely ever to be pulled out from the remote corner of the family wardrobe and aired in public. The suppressed memory of mass murder poisons the consciousness of the nation that witnessed it; the fact that this nation of silent witnesses did not contribute actively to its perpetration does not make the matter much easier. And because the subconscious knows that the guilt is there and will hardly ever go away, the consciousness rebels and vehemently seeks excuses. If only the victim could be blamed . . .

This seems to be the secret of the most spectacular of Holocaust survivals: anti-Semitism. It now lives, so to speak, without its traditional environment: it is truly out of its element. It has no new nourishment, no living experience to forage and fatten on. It is not alive, as a matter of fact. The hatred that outlived its objects is more like a rock. A solid rock, immovable and resistant to the sharpest of cutters. And suppressed guilt is

1. In a thorough, insightful, and carefully balanced analysis of the survival and transformation of "Jewish memory" in contemporary Poland, Iwona Irwin-Zarecka (1989: 166) admits the crucial role of the suppressed memory of Holocaust horrors: "The problem here might be that Poles were such close witnesses that they automatically interpret any general questions about the Holocaust as a challenge."

All translations from the Polish are mine.

its foundation. Gravestones remain of the Polish Jews; stony, *fossilized* anti-Semitism remains after eight hundred years of joint Polish-Jewish history.

How this joint history is retrospectively read depends on what one wants to find in it. From the perspective of the fossilized hatred, most visible in that history is a long record of Jewish treachery. In filmed interviews with witnesses of the Kielce pogrom, two persons remember the hostel run by the Jewish Committee in which the homeless remnants of the once lively Jewish community were housed. According to one, "These people were sad and frightened, somehow out of place, not intending to stay; they did not fit the landscape at all." The other saw more: "They were well off, well fed, well provided for. They got food parcels and money from America." The interviewees were asked to speak of the militiamen and the thousands of ordinary residents of the town who pursued dozens of Jews through the streets and beat them to death; instead, some spoke of the injustices they believed the Jews were guilty of committing: "They, the Jews, boasted: the streets belong to you, but the houses are ours. . . . No wonder people did not like them."

The memory of the millions of men, women, and children herded to their deaths under German occupation was not the only guilt that needed to be suppressed. Isaac Deutscher has pointed out more sinister reasons for renewed postwar anti-Semitism:

The grave of the Jewish middle class became the cradle of a new gentile middle class in eastern Europe . . . a *lumpenproletariat* which turned overnight into a *lumpenbourgeoisie*. The death certificates of the murdered Jews were their only valid trade licenses. . . . The only way in which the new "middle class" can save not so much its newly acquired wealth but its nerves and a pretense of respectability is by smoking out the surviving Jews. (Deutscher 1968: 88–89)

Empty houses, shops, and workshops did not stay empty for long. When the few survivors among their past owners emerged from hiding or boarded westward trains from their Russian exile or refuge, they were met with eyes filled with fear and fear-fed hatred, lest they should claim their property and in doing so remind the new owners of moments they would prefer to forget.

Twisting history to blame the victim was not a particularly difficult task. Long Polish-Jewish cohabitation was pliable stuff, fit to be molded to suit many interpretations and to supply telling, cogent, convincing arguments for almost any thesis. The theses themselves changed over time. One that gradually became dominant among Poles in the twentieth century was that the Jews were an alien, hostile, and poisonous body in the emerging Polish national organism, threatening the health and the very existence of a precarious Polish national identity.

This sentiment, however, could hardly appear before “Polish national identity” acquired its modern shape, that is, took on a purpose calling for conscious political administration of social development, cultural crusades, and the forceful transformation of chaotic leftovers of past history into a designed order. As Alina Cala, a most perceptive student of Polish-Jewish shared history, points out:

The idea of a single nation state, and the programmes associated with it of assimilating national and ethnic minorities, was foreign to premodern Polish thought. If a nineteenth-century peasant were ever asked if Jews should assimilate or emigrate, he would have been surprised and unable to respond. For him they were part of the unchangeable landscape as God had first created it. A demand to change the existing order would have seemed revolutionary to him—that is, contrary to God’s will, a prelude of apocalypse. The Jews with their side-curls and kaftans were part of life as created by God, testimony to the Passion of Christ, something threatening and strange, but necessary and unalterable. (1986: 148)

It was modern Polish nationalism, with its program of cultural homogeneity and its struggle for a *Polish state* which was to become a *state of the Poles*, that delivered a decisive blow to the habitual and natural, God-ordained order of things and set the world in turmoil. The ambiguity of the new situation and the sudden disappearance of divine sanction was deeply upsetting and frustrating. “The frustrations caused by participation in these stormy changes were channelled in the direction of totalitarian utopias. One of them was anti-Semitism. . . . It is one of the paradoxes of history that anti-Semitism strengthened the role of the Jew (or rather his myth) as a determinant of Polish national consciousness. Whole social groups discovered their national allegiance as an offshoot of the feeling of separateness from the Jews” (ibid.: 149).

National identity offered an escape and a shelter against that threatening ambivalence of which the Jews had now become the prime example. Note that Russians or Germans, by far the more threatening enemy by any standard, came second to the Jews as a negative support of the budding Polish national identity. They were enemies all right—but too *unambiguously* hostile for the purpose. Only the Jews were truly fit to exemplify in a clearly visible form “the other” of the national identity, that chaos against which national unity promised to defend. In no way were the Jews ambivalent before modernization took off. Jewish ambivalence, destined to serve as a focal point of nation forming processes, was itself a product of these processes. A crucial part of the *Kulturkampf* of the rising nation was the achievement of Polish cultural hegemony over the territory of the future nation-state, and thus the cultural conversion of ethnic minorities:

this, first and foremost, meant the assimilation of Jews. Yet the assimilatory program was (and had to be) as ambiguous as the cultural map it aimed to homogenize; in its operation more ambivalence was generated than eliminated. Jews who stuck to their traditional ways were singled out as proof of the essential estrangement of Jews from the Poles and their national ambitions. The real ogres were, however, the Jews attracted by the indubitable splendors of Polish culture, those responding with goodwill and enthusiasm to the invitation to join. It was they who became Kafka's *odra-deks*—mongrel creatures of unclassifiable identity, neither strangers nor “our own,” eluding all straightforward assignment and by the same token discrediting in advance the order yet to be installed. The more successful their Polonization was, the more threatening was the resulting ambivalence. They dressed like Poles, behaved like Poles, spoke like Poles, lived like Poles; for all one knew, they could easily be mistaken for Poles. Hence their ambivalence was of the worst possible kind because it could escape discovery. Such ambivalence calls for constant vigilance. Vigilance against Jewish duplicity and slyness became the major weapon of the border defense of the Polish nation.

Though the pool of assimilating Jews keen to embrace Polish culture never dried up, it had become clear well before the Polish nation-state was created that, for the ever more conspicuously resented Jewish masses, assimilation was not a realistic prospect. Already toward the end of the nineteenth century alternative ways out of the ghetto began to be sought, debated, and tried. The distinctly modern forms of Jewish national identity grew out of the most popular of these alternatives: Jewish nationalism in the shape of several varieties of Zionism, and Jewish socialism in the shape of the Bund (with its program of guarding and developing Jewish cultural uniqueness in the context of a humane, socialist Polish state, tolerant of human differentiation). This political map survived through the twenty-one year period (1918–39) of Polish independence. During that period, relations between the Polish state and its large Jewish minority were tense and fraught with mutual acrimony. Jewish political elites attracted the suspicions of Polish nationalists by siding with other national minorities of the multiethnic state in their shared resistance to the monopolistic aspirations of the ethnically Polish political elite. (Jewish political leaders, in fact, initiated a sort of “united front” with the Ukrainians, Belorussians, and other non-Poles, hoping to force the government to observe the rights of minorities.) On the other hand, the rising Polish nationalism and anti-Semitic sentiments, aided and abetted by the authoritative explanations of the persisting economic depression, made it increasingly clear to the Jews that they were unwanted; their right of residence in the land where their ancestors had lived for centuries was now questioned.



In the last years of Polish independence, Poles constantly discussed but never introduced anti-Jewish legislation of the Nuremberg type, and the Polish foreign minister urged European governments to "solve the Jewish problem" by providing outlets and resources for a massive Jewish emigration from Poland. The Jew most feted by the Polish government was Zhabotynski, the leader of the revisionist branch of Zionism, who promised cooperation in organizing the exodus of the Polish Jews.

No wonder that by the time the war broke out many a Pole was sufficiently primed to think, or at least not to object to his neighbor saying, that "after the war we would have to erect Hitler a monument." Jan Tomasz Gross (1986) has suggested that if the Germans punished all assistance to the Jews in Poland much more severely than in any other occupied country, and if their threat proved effective in preventing massive resistance to the Holocaust, a large part of the explanation resides in the resentment that a majority of Poles felt toward the Jews and the resulting isolation of that resented population. The "righteous among the Poles" often felt as isolated and abandoned by their own society as the hunted Jews they saved.

The Germans were not the only invaders of Polish soil. The eastern lands of Poland, where most of the national minorities lived, were occupied in 1939 by Soviet forces. To the Poles, there was little difference between the two enemies. For the Jews, the difference was one between life and death. Horrified, the Poles watched the enthusiasm with which most Jews greeted the Red Army. In his well-balanced account of Polish-Jewish antagonisms, Aleksander Smolar writes:

Very many Jews greeted the Red Army with enthusiasm, because they did not treat Poland as their Fatherland; they were pushed out of it, as the way to get rid of the Jews became the main topic of public debate. . . . The Jews, communists and non-communists, educated and half-educated, as trustworthy people, entered the local administration and helped to organize Soviet power. Worse still, they assisted Soviet authorities in their chase of Polish army officers and members of the prewar Polish administration. (1986: 97)

This treachery was neither forgotten nor forgiven by the Poles. As if a textbook example of the self-fulfilling prophecy, the Jews behaved exactly as the Polish anti-Semites kept saying they would, and by saying it the anti-Semites prompted them to do so. After the war, the same situation repeated itself. Smolar notes:

[The Jews], grateful to the USSR for saving their lives, socially isolated, culturally uprooted, aware of the resentment or hostility of their environment but dreaming of equality, fraternity, and of giving a good lesson to the 'forces of reaction,' made an excellent material for the new power. Not to mention the

committed communists of the old guard, among whom the percentage of Jews was very high. (Ibid.: 119)

Transformed by assimilatory pressures into the frightening and hateful symbol of ambivalence and threat to national existence, the Jews (and *particularly* the assimilating Jews, Jews eager to embrace Polish culture and Polish nationhood) were forcefully excluded from membership in the Polish national community and faced with choices that could only deepen their estrangement and erect new obstacles to mutual understanding. Acceptance predicated on assimilation proved contradictory. On both sides, the drama left a pungent aftertaste which made the "washing of dirty linen" all the more difficult. Suppressed and never faced in all their unpleasant truth, the memories fester and poison. There is more than enough food for the unhealed Jewish aggravation against this erstwhile homeland, and for the bizarre phenomenon of Polish anti-Semitism in the absence of Jews.

### Language as Shelter

Of Julian Tuwim, one of the most influential and innovative Polish poets of the twentieth century, another Polish Jew and formidable literary theorist and critic, Artur Sandauer, wrote: "Essentially, assimilation did not succeed; what succeeded was the poetry, born of that failed assimilation and of unhappy love for Poland. . . . As the other Poland refused to accept him, Polish language remained his true homeland" (1985a: 467–68).<sup>2</sup> The true homeland and the *only* homeland (as all true homelands are). Also, in no small measure, an unshared homeland, its landscape little known and still less understood by those who happened to be born into the "other Poland," closed to Tuwim, or by those who, put off by the locks, never knocked on the door and thus did not need to seek substitute shelters. In an unshared land, Tuwim's creative force could be let loose. The result was great poetry and a landscape which, though familiar, made many ill

2. Of himself, Sandauer writes (1985a): "Sandauer's life is a history of a Jew persecuted for his origin. As a writer, however, he is someone very (perhaps excessively?) Polish on account of his language. His purism betrays a neophyte." One can discern a self-portrait in Sandauer's fictional hero *Mieczysław* (an ultra-Polish Christian name) *Rosenzweig*—"a hero built of two halves hating each other." Caught between the equally unprepossessing alternatives (an inauthentic and bleached identity, or a self-hating and demonizing personality), Sandauer admits to being suspended in a state of "unstable balance," in which he "sees any choice as naïveté" (1985b: 526–29). At no stage of the checkered political history of post-war Poland did Sandauer quite fit the prevailing mood. Always an outsider, a debunker by nature, a pedantic, pungent, sullen, and quarrelsome critic, he succeeded in antagonizing all the otherwise warring camps of the Polish literary world in more or less equal measure.

at ease. The landscape of Tuwim's homeland had been carved by assimilation: "Their look shapes us from inside, grafts itself upon us as a mistletoe, so that we can only see ourselves through their eyes." Together with the culture of the society he enters, an assimilating Jew also absorbs its myths, "including such myths as are hostile to him." So did Tuwim; in his poetic homeland, the war was waged against priggishness, yet the knight-errant was "seen through the prigs' eyes" (ibid.: 103, 107).

Original and unique as a poet and a stylist, Tuwim was nevertheless a specimen of a type. He was an artist called upon to join a nation fighting for its place in a world filled with nations, and to help develop a culture which could make such a place secure and honorable. He was also a Jew whose place *in the nation* was put in doubt at the moment when the place of *the nation* had been made secure by statehood.

In the age when modern nations were born, the Poles were not only deprived of the political instruments of national self-constitution but were divided between the realms of three foreign dynasties. However hard the core, the peripheries of such a nation must have been diluted and the boundaries unclear. Polish nationalists had to fight off not only the political pretenses of hostile and powerful states but also the cultural claims of rival, strong or weak, militant and ambitious nationalisms. Without a state of its own, Polish nationalism could rely only on the power of cultural proselytism. It needed as many allies as it could muster among the creators and distributors of culture. No one asked too many questions about the birth certificates of the writers and artists who treated the magnificence of Polish culture as their sacred cause. The cultural door of the nation-in-search-of-statehood remained ajar and the newcomers were welcome. (The door would be slammed later, but not before real border guards manned real political entries and exits.) The nation needed cultural strength to compensate for its political weakness. Whatever the cause, the invitation seemed—and was—unconditional.

It did attract an uncounted number of Jews seeking escape from the ghetto. Polishness meant to them, as to all others within the orbit of Polish cultural influence, the chance to share in a highly attractive culture—but it also meant the liberation from a caste-like (or, rather, outcast) condition. Since, however, membership in Polish culture in the case of refugees from the ghetto was *acquired* and hence precarious, the Polishness of the Jews was easily distinguished by the exaltation: "An exaggerated care for the excellence of language, pedantic observance of all customs considered distinctly Polish, a cult of Polish literature and art, often a truly fanatical nationalism and chauvinism." This exaggeration followed (almost logically) from a situation in which the examiners' attentions never relaxed,

testing never ceased, and there was no way of guessing whether one's performance, however spectacular, would be accepted as satisfactory (Hertz 1988: 164–66).<sup>3</sup> However understandable, Jewish zeal was nevertheless destined to be sooner or later interpreted as a sign of inborn tactlessness, arrogance, and pushiness.

Thus, paradoxically, the Polish excellence of the Jews carried the seeds of Polish *allo*-Semitism: though split into anti- and philo-Semite camps, the Poles in their majority agreed on the *otherness* of Jews. Whether because of their exceptional slyness or exceptional gifts, the Jews *were not quite like the Poles* and neither could nor should be treated as Poles.<sup>4</sup> The less that remained of the once highly visible peculiarity of the Jews, which locked them in their caste-like existence without any need of ideological or scientific formula, the more the repellency had to be theorized and made into the topic of public discourse and political initiative.

In the independent Polish state that came into existence after World War I, Polish nationalism lost (or, rather, discarded and disowned) its proselytizing zeal. The project of cultural conversion of non-Polish ethnic groups inhabiting the territory of the Polish state went on unabated, now assisted by administrative manipulation and political coercion—but only in relation to the larger national groupings whose main habitat remained outside the borders of the new Polish state; groupings, in other words, that could raise their own reunification claims against Polish territorial possessions. Since the Jews could not possibly come forward with such a demand, their declarations of Polishness offered little political profit. For the Polish nationalists, and particularly for the rising Polish national intelligentsia, the three million Jews residing inside the Polish state constituted a tangible threat to Polish domination of cultural life: it was in the area of culture, through which the Jews were once called to enter the Polish nation, that a sizable part of the Jewish minority most spectacularly excelled. The emergent modern culture of Poland was full of converted and unconverted Jews. Coming from urban centers and boasting the best education Poland could offer, they easily assumed the role of cultural umpires to whom the native poets and writers, more often than not of rural if not

3. Aleksander Hertz remembers a letter he received from a friend, decorated with the highest Polish distinction awarded for supreme military gallantry. The friend wrote: "I had to be courageous. Did I falter, it would be said that the Jew was a coward" (Hertz 1988: 166).

4. A striking example of the *allo*-Semitic view can be found in the *Diaries* of Witold Gombrowicz, hardly an anti-Semite: "When I hear from those people that the Jewish nation is like other nations, I feel like listening to Michelangelo insisting that he does not differ from the others." "Those who received the right to superiority have no right to equality." "History of that nation is a secret provocation, similar to the biography of all great men—a provocation of fate, inviting disasters that can help fulfill the mission of the chosen nation" (1957: 121).

of peasant extraction, looked for guidance and accolades. Expectedly, the growth of their importance in Polish cultural life went hand in hand with the increase in the intensity and spread of Polish anti-Semitism. Hence the “unique phenomenon: the most beloved writers became, as persons, the most hated” (Sandauer 1985a: 460). This incongruity profoundly affected both the Jews and their hosts. Because much of Polish culture was now the product of persons “tainted” with an alien, resented origin, culture and intellectualism as such became suspect; the nation did not trust its own artistic and literary culture, and such suspicion offered fertile soil for all sorts of anti-intellectual, obscurantist, and retrograde movements for which interwar Poland became notorious. For the Polish cultural creators of Jewish origin, on the other hand, this duality turned out to be something of an asset, on top of the usual artistic and philosophical stimuli inherent in the contradictions of the assimilatory process.

To quote Sandauer again, “to assimilate” means to “stay, defenseless, under the gaze of the others” and to accept without murmur the judgmental canons and the aesthetic criteria of others. In so doing, the “assimilating individual” must also “consent to his own ugliness” (*ibid.*: 468).<sup>5</sup> Jewishness was declared ugly, and so were all the so-called Jewish traits. One could do something (at least in theory) to escape the ugliness of Jewish religion by conversion, or of Jewish habits or manners of speaking by self-drill. There was nothing one could do about one’s looks—and this heinous gift of the genes tended to emerge unscathed from no matter how many bucketsful of baptismal water. The Polish poet Antoni Slonimski, born to an already Christian father, inherited from his ancestors a distinctly Jewish face together with their passionate adoration of Polish culture; the second did not help him against the first. Like the others—the unconverted, those who openly flaunted their Jewish roots and those who tried to hide or deny them—Slonimski was disqualified because he was a Jew. The more racist Polish anti-Semitism became, the more unambiguously it operated.

All this left little ground for self-deceit. Anti-Semitism, and particularly

5. Of the interwar life of the Jews assimilated into Polish culture, Efraim Kaganowski, a Jewish writer from Warsaw, left a few shuddering, perceptive sketches: “Cafe Ziemianska, where the avant-garde of the Polish-Jewish congregate. Writers, poets, artists come here—a curious family, which on every opportunity complains of the ‘Jewish gathering.’ They are not yet sure of their Polishness and suddenly notice that they are surrounded only by other Jews. This is why they feel so well here. . . . It is hopeless in the narrow Jewish streets. But it is also gloomy in the affluent Jewish flats. And only late at night in a large Jewish bourgeois restaurant. . . . can you meet creatures from another world, whom you have never seen so far in any Jewish place. . . . But this Jewish nightlife does not intoxicate. On their way back home the night guests do not feel drunk. The Jewish eyes are fearful and vigilant. These men want to be crushed in the crowd so that they can stop feeling how lonely they are” (1958: 174–75).

the staunch refusal of cultural membership on noncultural grounds, became in effect a powerful antidote to the parochialism that always lurks at the end of the nationalist itinerary. As cultural creators, Jews of all shades of assimilation stood out for their power to see through and beyond parochial constraints. This quality antagonized the nationalists but it also made the cultural creators among Polish Jews the carriers of modern experience and the articulators of modern culture.

Treated as aliens by the Polish public, Polish-Jewish writers found their retreat and shelter in the Polish language. Here, they felt at home. As the home stood in the midst of a social desert, they lavished on it all their otherwise unspent emotions. The language benefited, though its benefactors did not. Most of the latter perished as Jews, and were only posthumously upgraded to the rank of Poles—in recognition of their martyrdom rather than of their creative lives. The few who survived easily recognized in postwar Poland the all-too-familiar atmosphere of surveillance and vigilant censorship. Now, to be sure, they were not charged with the crime of Jewishness. The accusation was rephrased and reworded to suit the changing circumstances. Sometimes they were resented simply as the carriers of an unspecified “alien spirit.” At other times as “cosmopolitans.” Or “Zionists.” Or “Communists.” Or “Russian helpers” (when it came to the account-settling with the Stalinist episode, the Jewish collaborators, as always, bore the brunt of responsibility shared with countless others, and were expected to engage in much louder breast-beating than anyone else; with much less effect, however, than anyone else).

After the last survivors of the Holocaust ran away from the survivals of anti-Semitism, no Jewish community, Jewish culture, or Jewish institutions of any importance remained on Polish soil. All the more remarkable is the towering presence of two blatantly and demonstratively Jewish, yet superbly Polish, writers: Adolf Rudnicki and Julian Strykowski. Their language, originally a shelter, has become the temple of a nationwide cult. Their books are sold out the day they are published. Readers love them, and critics lavish praise on them. For whom do they write? Who reads them? What for?

### **Adolf Rudnicki, or, Poles like Jews**

Like so many other survivors, Rudnicki greeted the new socialist Poland with hope. In the mouth of the hero of one of his stories written shortly after the war, he put a bitter reproach addressed to a Jewish mother who complained about her son's refusal to leave the “land of the graveyards”: “National, radical differences will find nothing to feed on—and for this

reason, young people will not find them in themselves" (1957). He deleted these words from a later version; wiser by a few years of dashed hopes and frustrated expectations, he wrote instead:

This new breed was to be made of gold—and yet it is not made of gold. In those "first things" in spiritual matters, nature has the upper hand, and nature derides beautiful words. Nature did not allow itself to be evicted and made fools of those who imagined that she would surrender easily. The new breed was to be antichauvinistic, antiracist, rational, internationalist. It is not.

In view of such an experience, the question of self-identity becomes crucial. At the beginning, the answer is ambivalent, as are the situations of Rudnicki's literary characters whose conversations only thinly disguise the author's own agonized soul-searching. (Often several characters are needed to convey the author's torments in full, as no single character burdened with them all—illogical, perhaps inane, in their coexistence—would seem credible as a sane subject.) One, speaking in the first person, declares bluntly: "I always think of myself as a Pole; the rest is my complicated business. If Poland thinks otherwise, it is Her complicated business" (Rudnicki 1957: 68).

When the Warsaw ghetto burned, people in the street told each other: "This fire is in the ghetto," which sounded like "somewhere far away." They said, "It is in the ghetto," and recovered their calm. Detonations shook the earth and the streets, but not the people. These were the years of contempt. Smart and adroit German troops made the residents of Warsaw into hunchbacks—first some of them, the selected ones, the Jews, then a bit later the others. They made sure that turns were properly taken, that the others had had their share of laughs before they were told of their own humps.<sup>6</sup>

This was a contempt felt by a lackey proud of using a WC, for an "Eastern" creature who uses only a wooden shack, and by a lackey proud of shaving every day, for a creature who did not shave daily. . . . Since the war, I am in deadly fear of people too well dressed, too well washed, as this very fact cuts them off from the rest, prompts them to look down at the slightly less well dressed. I always see them as they enter their huge offices early in the morning, sit in front of their big diagrams, the products of their cold, dry, orderly nights, containing designs for destruction of millions of lesser humans, like you and me. . . . I am in deadly fear of excessive order, even of the sportsmen, whose exaggerated smartness—it always seems to me—cannot lead to any good.

6. The hump is a well-established trope in Polish-Jewish literature. Perhaps the most famous example of its use is Julian Tuwim's poem of a hunchback imagining his suicide; he would buy a most beautiful necktie and hang himself with it. To no avail, though: "No one will say 'what a wondrous necktie' / Everybody'll comment 'what an awful hump.'"

The experience of being at the receiving end of contempt was staged, but it was shared. We all know now, or at least we could know if we wished, that for everyone there is an order, a standard of smartness, a measure of dressing that could make him into a hunchback. Is not culture about making the humps grow? Is not contempt, that license to snub and despise and kill, what culture is about? "Culture is a narrow, rotten plank thrown over a pool teeming with crocodiles, who will get in the end what they want. True, one always needs a task, one time it could be culture, some other time an anti-culture, but whether it is culture or anti-culture the pride is always the same—the pride, arrogance, conceit."

What Rudnicki has in mind is a culture arrogant, self-assertive, militant, aggressive, and intolerant. A culture sufficiently sure of itself to subordinate or kill; one that uses its splendors as a mask of oppression. Sooner or later, it may become a bait set to attract the crocodiles. Promise of safe passage is loud yet unreliable. The threat of disaster grows in strength alongside trust in the promise.

This is the wisdom the Jews learned earlier and more profoundly than their neighbors. They derived it first from the unhealed wound of rejected acculturation. Then, as if to remove the last trace of doubt, the truth of their wisdom was confirmed by the tragedy of the Holocaust—a tragedy that revealed the loneliness that centuries of shared life and suffering had not removed. This is the lesson hammered home by the work of Rudnicki—a legatee, warden, and messenger of that wisdom. It is perhaps because they feel that they need this wisdom or may well yet need it in the future, that young and not-so-young Poles avidly grasp each successive Rudnicki story. Or perhaps they do it, at least for the time being, only because they wish to learn more about these strange, incomprehensible people whom they agree to promote only posthumously to the rank of their compatriots.

### **Julian Strykowski, or the Duty to Remember**

At the age of eighty-five, Julian Strykowski has no time to waste. He writes avidly, greedily, obsessively. In a span of four years, he recorded the stories of Moses, King David, Judah Maccabee—in his own words, "the greatest prophet, the greatest king, and the greatest hero" in the tormented history of the Jews, these "people with a hump on their backs—not the wings of freedom, as in fairy tales, but rags of slavery" (1957: 194).

By his own admission, this Jewish writer, as a child, took refuge in the Polish language. With that language he fell in love. The depth of feelings did not help the suitor, though. In the new Polish secondary school in the new independent Poland, the headmaster asked children to name



their nationality. Little Aaron Stark called himself a Jew. He explained his nationality, we imagine, in a pure, precise, and pleasing Polish. Yet he was expelled on the spot. "The boy was thrown out from his Paradise." The headmaster did not quite succeed, however: "The child found his refuge. The Word accepted him. The Word and the child remained faithful to each other forever after" (Strykowski 1987: 188). The Word offered shelter to the homeless. It has also proved his exile.

Replying to the inquiry on the "Meaning of Polishness," conducted by the Catholic literary journal *Żnak*, Strykowski wrote: "When, as a Jewish child who spoke Yiddish only, I heard a Polish word, I was dazzled" (ibid.). The hero of *Voices from Darkness*, woven out of the author's childhood memories, explains what being dazzled meant. His sister Miriam, a teacher in a Polish school, speaks Yiddish with her parents and older brother, but she addresses her kid brother in Polish: "Little Aaron smiled and nodded. Did he, or did he not understand? The words sounded beautiful. Those he heard most often the child linked with glittering objects: with mirror, glasses, hanging candlestick" (1957: 266). When Aaron finally enters—not without a struggle—a Polish primary school, his teacher of Polish is Berta Apfelgrün. "One Jew teaches another Jew how to be a Pole," Aaron's uncle comments caustically, sadly—and truthfully (ibid.: 269).

The shtetl had its own dreams. Like all dreams, they were cut to the dreamer's measure. On a Saturday evening, in a rapidly darkening synagogue ("they lit the candles in the synagogue as late as they could; let Saturday last as long as possible amidst the Jews"), little Aaron listens to the quiet, low voice of the Rabbi. He does not understand the complexities, but he knows the Rabbi is telling the story of the Messiah. The Messiah rides into town on a white horse. And after that glorious moment, no one needs to study in the *kheder* anymore, nor does his mother need to freeze in her market stall. Bread grows on trees. The *Sabbath*, that most Jewish measure of happiness and beauty, is on the other side of the invisible walls of the ghetto. It moves massively to that side once the walls, poorly guarded on the outside, are repaired and kept solid by those who stay inside them. The Messiah pitches his tents in the priest's orchard. Melodic sounds of Polish words, those holes in the black fence, allow little Aaron to catch a glimpse of the eternal Sabbath.

Julian Strykowski did not just look through the hole. Enchanted by what he saw and propelled by the Jewish messianic impatience, he flew over the black fence into the astounding beauty of the Polish language. He has become a venerated master of Polish prose. His novels capture the shine, the clarity, the unique emotional tension, and the human warmth of the language in which he writes. The critics report the pleasure which

grows and overwhelms them with every page of Strykowski's prose. His language, they say, is "pure like spring water" (1988: 67).

Strykowski came into the Polish language to celebrate the Jewish Sabbath. The same force brought him into the ranks of the clandestine Polish Communist Party. The messianic urge pointed clearly and unambiguously to the world of tolerance and forgiveness, of light and beauty, of holiness on earth, of the Sabbath seven days a week, which the Communists promised. Disenchantment came fast. At the same time, the news came that the nation that had dreamed of perpetual Sabbath faced the greatest threat of its history.

Cast by war into remote places in Soviet Central Asia, Strykowski began to write his first great Jewish epic, *Voices from Darkness* (published twelve years later)—and he has not stopped writing since. Strykowski writes of the dead for the sake of the living. The memory of the nation that disappeared must live in the memory of the nation that survived. Let the selfsame Polish language, which lured the dead with its splendor and yet proved a cage for many, become their permanent and secure shelter now that they are no more. Let them enter through this language the enchanted land they once lived in without being a part of.

In the shtetl of *Voices from Darkness* and *The Echo* (1988), life went in circles with melancholic monotony. It was as cyclical as that of the peasant. Peasant time is kept in motion by the annual rhythm of field work attuned to the succession of the natural seasons. Jewish time was calibrated by the alternation of the holy and the profane, by the repeated order of the Holy Calendar. As if to underline the cyclical nature and completeness of the holy order, each of the two novels confines its action to one year. In *Voices from Darkness*, it is a year between Aaron's two successive birthdays. In *The Echo*, the year runs between the endings of two successive school years. The holy and the secular merge, as the rhythm of human life mirrors the timeless replay of the holy cycle. This applies to the old and aging as much as to the young and growing. The second year differs from the first by being seen through eyes that have grown one year older. Like the preceding year, it is measured by the passage from New Year to the Day of Atonement, to Sukkoth, to Chanukkah, to Purim, to Passover. And, of course, both years are punctuated by the weekly spots of beauty, tranquility, and serenity: the Sabbaths. The quotidian draws meaning from waiting for the holy days.

In the course of both years, the community whose life rests on that timeless repetition fights for its survival. In the first year, the threat comes from Scharie. In the second, from Manes. Scharie is a rich property owner who has robbed two impoverished sisters-in-law of their inheritance. Manes is a twelve-year-old boy who, on the Day of Atonement, eats a ham sand-

wich in public. The community loses its fight against Scharie and rejoices in the defeat. It gains a gruesome victory over Manes (the boy hangs himself to escape the curse) and bewails it.

Modche Stark, little Aaron's older brother, who is with Manes's brother in Hungary when the disaster happens, leaves the community for good. For Palestine. Aaron will go instead to a Polish school, where at the celebration of his first promotion he will recite the poem: "Who are you? A little Pole. What is your sign? The White Eagle."

The hump made of the rags of serfdom: How to shake it off? As a Jew sharing the land of Poles? As a Jew leaving behind the land of Poles? As a Jew who pretends to be a Pole? Can one do it with the community? Outside the community? Against the community?

*Visitor from Narbonne* (1978) is a novel Strykowski dedicated to the fighters of the Warsaw ghetto. In that ghetto, the choices that the resident of Stryj spent two full years pondering without getting wiser were forced upon people in a flash. Instantly, it had become clear who was the enemy and who was the brother. Yet the choices were not clearer than before. Their condensation and urgency made their complexity all the more evident, and conclusions all the more difficult to reach.

In the novel, Eli Ibn Gaist arrives from his native Narbonne at a small Spanish town that is writhing in the clutches of the Inquisition. Young, confident, and proud of his wealth, ancestry, and the public respect in which he has bathed since childhood, Eli is ill-prepared for what he finds. Furtive glances, whispers, half-finished sentences, stealthy gaits, faces frozen into masks—all this is difficult enough to comprehend. Something else, however, is yet more bewildering. "In Narbonne, everything was clear and simple. Evil was evil, good was good. When touched by suffering, however, evil and goodness mix up, swirl." When told that sometimes evil ought to be covered up for the sake of good, Eli feels baffled and confused. "So the world is like this? This gives me no peace. . . . The worst is the first crack in the thought. It is like a blemish on the surface of a fruit which inside is already rotten" (1978: 279).

The cracks are, indeed, many. In the span of the few days which divide Eli's arrival from his heroic and grotesque, redeeming yet purposeless death, goodness is soiled by evil, evil dressed as mercy, so that in the end one can no longer tell where the boundary between them runs. Before he dies, Eli is confused. With his last breath, the meaning of his death escapes.

Another visitor, this time to the town of Stryj, the hometown of Aaron Stark, is Martin Heiber: a highly educated, big-town lawyer, spreading the Zionist gospel among the baffled and incredulous residents of the shtetl. Like Eli, he feels humiliated by the confusion and indecision of the ghetto,

not very different from that of the barrio. Few listen to his appeals to courage and dignity; fewer still comprehend; no one agrees.

We live in fast flowing, but shallow times. In such water only small fish can live. Our Jewish life is like a stagnant puddle. If a carp happens to be there, it must die. It will suffocate. . . . I searched, tussled like fish on a sandy beach. I found nobody, nobody. Only minnows. On whom could I lean? On whom could I rest my faith? I wandered from town to town, looked people in the eyes. Emptiness everywhere. And I spoke of the Great Renewal! (1957: 399)

What makes the shtetl routine repulsive and unbearable to Heiber is the stench of serfdom and its spiritual sediment: complacency. It is a slavery that has been sucked in, digested, woven into the bodies and souls of people who feel at home only in the ghetto. Consent to such a life is indignity. Nonconformity is the only way to spiritual regeneration. A powerful idea is needed. Yet more than an idea, powerful men are needed, men who can stand up and say no. What they say "no" to is less important.

To Heiber, one such man was Herzl. Since Herzl's death, Heiber has looked for another one capable, as Herzl had been, of waking the sleeping giant of the nation. What the cost of such determination might be, Heiber does not yet know. The century is still young and innocent, and so is Heiber's Zionism.

Old Tag, the hero of another Strykowski novel, *The Inn*, tells the following story which his grandfather allegedly heard from no lesser authority than the Holy Besht.

There is a huge mountain, and a big stone on the top of that mountain, and pure water flows from beneath. There is a soul on the other end of the world. That thirsty soul longs all its life for this source with its clean water. But the soul will never reach this source and will never quench its thirst. That will happen only when Messiah comes. The soul must wait till he comes. Then, it will be all the same for everybody. In the meantime, the heart may burst. (1966: 89)

The source has not been reached yet. For all the suffering and its tragic end, the source seems not to be nearer now than it was all along. But the effort to reach it can and should be recorded, if only to know where it cannot be found. This, at least, is how Julian Strykowski remembers Aaron Stark's reasons for hiding in the shelter of the Polish Word.

Given such reasons, this was not just a hiding, and not merely a shelter. The refugees burdened the Word with all their unfulfilled hopes, promises received but not kept, and first and foremost with their dreams of a world of moral purity. They made the Word grow, expand, and rise to seldom-visited moral heights. If it is true that assimilation arrived from outside as a

painful pressure, it is true as well that it was filled from inside by the ethical urge. It will thus forever be remembered as a folly, perhaps, but not a sin.

The refugees brought a gift to the hosts, and the gift will stay with them even if they are slow to acknowledge its reception. It is Polish science, literature, poetry, and art that gained most from the episode of assimilation.

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