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Memory and Neighborhood:
Poles and Poland
in Jewish American Fiction
after World War Two

**Warsaw Studies in Jewish History
and Memory**

Introduction

The world of *belles-lettres* usually invites an intellectual, aesthetic or historical approach. I remain convinced of the legitimacy of using fiction as a resource towards a better understanding of collective mentality. In this project I have attempted to apply this approach with the aim of allowing an insight into Jewish American perception of Poles, Poland and Polishness, as well as with the hope of obtaining a closer look at Polish-Jewish dialogue, or, as is often the case, its vagaries into communication breakdowns. Looking at Polish-Jewish dialogue through the perspective of American literature turns it into a conversation¹ in which various very different stakeholders are involved: American Jews, Polish Americans, Poles from Poland, Polish Jews. There is more to this complexity than meets the eye.

Fiction reflects social reality, even when it is in thrall to experimentation with various post-modern departures from narrative forms or when it escapes from representation. There is no doubt that books read exert influence upon those who read them. Another well-known truth is that the extent of influence, measured by the number of copies sold, may stand in stark contrast to critical and scholarly evaluation.

Literature remains one of the main channels through which identity and ethnic, cultural or national stereotypes are formulated. The stereotypes formulated and perpetuated in fiction may themselves become cognitive tools in perceiving others. The fragment below on the significance of studying literature for purposes of understanding cultural stereotypes comes from the book *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*, and more precisely the chapter in which Naomi Sokoloff analyses stereotypes and identity in the fiction of Israeli writers Aharon Appelfeld and Sayed Kashua:

There is no doubt that the images promoted in literature have played a crucial role over many centuries in shaping cultural identities, fostering ethnic awareness, and even spurring nationalist movements. Therefore, it is important to assess not only how writers deploy stereotypes but also how their work functions for and is received by their readership. (Glenn, Sokoloff, 44)

That statement would refer to literature in a great many various contexts. Leon Poliakov (115) in his monumental *Histoire de l'antisémitisme* uses the representations of Jews in literature to demonstrate the changing attitude to Jews in medieval Spain. Jewish writers in Poland after the Second World War dealt

1 With the option of turning into a quarrel or a conversational overlap in which nobody listens to anybody.

“primarily with the dilemma of the assimilated Polish-Jewish intellectual for whom the tragic memory of a lost culture and a realization of his own Jewishness collides with his commitment to the new Poland” (Gladsky, 179). These writers, such as Julian Strykowski, Artur Sandauer and Adolf Rudnicki, creating in Polish and focusing on such identity issues, proved the end of the East-Central European Yiddish culture.

Examples of how literature reflects ethnicity and identity could be given endlessly. American multiculturalism in particular may offer a plethora of examples. Comparing British-Jewish literature and American-Jewish literature, Bryan H. Cheyette stressed: “In contrast, the American-Jewish writer is able constantly to re-imagine or re-mythologize their relationship to a European past in a much less harmonious manner” (in Kerbel, 8). As this re-imagining and re-mythologizing takes place within the dynamics of what Cheyette calls “the mobility and Protean nature of American culture” (8), Jewish-American fiction naturally provides an artistically fascinating resource of relevant examples, reflective of Jewish Americans’ collective memory of Poland as well as of the perception of Polish American neighbors.

There are examples that fiction has a significant influence on the perception of other ethnic groups. Danusha Goska, who wrote the book on Polish-Jewish relations entitled *Bieganski: The Brute Polak Stereotype, Its Role in Polish-Jewish Relations and American Popular Culture*, quotes in the interview section one respondent giving Chaim Potok, a popular Jewish American writer, as one of her interviewee’s sources of knowledge about the history of Polish-Jewish relations:

I [Goska, the interviewer] mentioned that Jews had once dubbed Poland ‘Polin,’ translated as ‘here shalt thou lodge.’ Karen was contemptuous. ‘I learned from Chaim Potok that Jews were invited in to fill an economic gap,’ she insisted, even after I mentioned that other groups that did not fill the economic niche that Jews did, e.g. Muslims and Arians, found religious refuge in Poland. (218)

The rest of the interview indicates that the respondent’s negative attitude towards Poland was most of all formed by her mother who was a Polish Jew, but the mention of the writer Chaim Potok, whose representations of Poles and Poland focus almost exclusively on anti-Semitism, indicates that his books must have added significantly to the respondent’s views.

Research material here was constituted by Jewish American literature created after the Second World War. In the books studied references to Poles and Poland, even though generally marginal, were universally present; out of seventy books read for the analysis only six did not generate any material. This

is not really surprising, considering the opinion of Dalia Kandiyoti in her article “What is the ‘Jewish’ in ‘Jewish American Literature’”:

Contemporary ‘Jewish American Studies,’ is, overwhelmingly, East European/Ashkenazi Studies—all other histories, experiences, identifications, and narratives are minoritized. (49)

A quick look at canon-forming anthologies like *The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* or the more recent *Scribblers on the Roof: Contemporary Jewish Fiction* and most other such collections shows that virtually no creative life and history outside of the Eastern European (and to a certain extent Western European) context figures into the making of U.S. Jewish writing. (50)

Doubtless there is a broad diversity of Jewish identities in America, including the Sephardic tradition as well as the Jewishness derived from the Muslim world, yet the literary scene is dominated by the Ashkenazi tradition. Thomas Gladsky, who studied American literature from the perspective of the portrayal of Poles, stressed that Jewish-American writers may not write about Poland or Jews and Poles, nonetheless their “works collectively suggest that Poland is never far from memory even in novels ostensibly about Jewishness in America” (192). Dalia Kandiyoti and Thomas Gladsky may be speaking about different things, yet a related conclusion is inevitable: East-Central European (or, narrowed down, Polish) heritage will come through in Jewish-American fiction and justifies its study from this perspective.

The additional value of focusing on the novel (which is the main form studied here, alongside some short stories and a few semi-autobiographical books) lies in its openness as a form. Magdalena Zaborowska², recalling Mikhail Bakhtin, stresses the character of a novel as an unbound medium in which “many different voices find expression and engage with one another – it provides an ideal meeting ground for intercultural exchanges” (15). The novels analyzed here move from traditional, almost 19th century narrative forms to magical realism, thus allowing a multiplicity of voices from the past and the present, from here and there, to mingle and interact.

Several of the books used as research material are based on family history and I consider them semi-auto/biographical: two by Max Apple, *I Love Gootie: My Grandmother’s Story* and *Roommates: My Grandfather’s Story*, Paul Auster’s *From Hand to Mouth*, Raymond Federman’s *Return to Manure* and Philip Roth’s *Patrimony*. Since these novels use dialogue, Apple, Federman and Roth’s in particular strongly relying on conversation as a vehicle for narration,

2 In her book *How We Found America. Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives* Zaborowska analyzed, among others, the works of Anzia Yezierski and Mary Antin.

they cannot be considered pure autobiography. They belong to a genre in-between fiction and non-fiction, as they use the recollections of real life and fictional supplements to these memories. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* uses family history as the basis of the narrative in the book, which, as the only one in the research material, has the form of a graphic novel.

The writers whose books were analyzed for this project represented all generations of Jewish-American authors who began writing after the Second World War. The oldest were Bernard Malamud, born in 1914, then Saul Bellow and Herman Wouk, both born a year later, in 1915; the youngest are represented by Nathan Englander, born in 1970, Myla Goldberg, born in 1971, and Jonathan Safran Foer, born in 1977. The timeline of the books analyzed is equally broad. It begins with books published in the 1950s: Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and some of his short stories, Leon Uris's *Exodus*, Harold Brodkey's *First Love and Other Sorrows* and Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*, going onto those which appeared after the year 2000: Allegra Goodman's *Paradise Park*, *Intuition*, *The Other Side of the Island* and *The Cookbook Collector*, Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*, *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Invisible*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Steve Stern's *The Angel of Forgetfulness* and *The Frozen Rabbi*, Pearl Abraham's *The Seventh Beggar*, Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, Raymond Federman's *Return to Manure*, Tova Reich's *My Holocaust* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*. The books selected for analysis represent all the decades of the development of Jewish-American literature in the period after the Second World War.

The status of the authors whose work was scrutinized is another matter requiring some explanation. Some of them, particularly Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, are clearly canonical, and so is Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (although, contrary to the work of the three other authors, the novel's link with Jewishness is through the author's background, while in the case of the others it is mostly through the choice of the subject matter). Several other writers used in this research have achieved a very high status, almost canonical: Paul Auster, Cynthia Ozick, E.L. Doctorow, Leslie Epstein, Raymond Federman, Susan Sontag, Art Spiegelman³ and Grace Paley. Cynthia Ozick in particular is a highly respected author, while Paul Auster is additionally very popular with readers. Other writers of the older generation (born both pre- and post-war) are certainly accomplished and well known: Max Apple, Bruce Jay

3 Polish critic Wojciech Orliński calls Art Spiegelman "the most outstanding comic strip artist in the world" (52), in connection with his art and particularly with Spiegelman's having been invited as a guest of honor to The Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2012.

Friedman, Tova Reich, Edward Lewis Wallant, Chaim Potok, Harold Brodkey, Rebecca Goldstein and Steve Stern. Then there is the generation of middle-aged and young writers who have achieved critical acclaim and gained popularity with readers: Pearl Abraham, Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer and Myla Goldberg. Finally, I also looked at two popular writers who constitute categories in themselves: Herman Wouk and Leon Uris. Both created historical fiction focusing on the Jewish fate in 20th century Europe, achieving great popular success, but while Herman Wouk treated history with respect, Leon Uris manipulated it, often without any restraint. Yet the readability of his fiction and the enormous commercial success Uris enjoyed make it impossible to ignore him.

Some justification should be given here as to why I did not include two important writers who often come to mind in association with Jewish-American fiction, namely Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jerzy Kosiński. I do not consider either of them sufficiently American to reflect the Jewish American frame of mind in its specific perception of Poles and Poland. Singer was born in Leoncin near Warsaw, and grew up and spent his early adulthood in Poland, so his knowledge of Poland was a first-hand experience, not the memory of his ancestors. Additionally, he mostly wrote in Yiddish. His images of Poles and Poland, even if in some ways similar to those that can be found in fiction by American authors, are derived from a very different background experience. Jerzy Kosiński, even though most of his novels were written while he lived in New York, seems too European, furthermore his formative years were spent in Poland, where he was born. Everything he knew and felt about Poland resulted, as in the case of Singer, from first-hand experience and was not filtered through American perception. Neither Singer nor Kosiński may be considered to be representing Jewish-American collective mentality through their fiction.

In the literature analyzed here, even though so many traces of Poland as well as secondary Polish characters can be found, there is relatively little obvious concern with Polish matters. For example, only on a few occasions is the action set in Poland, and even then only momentarily. There is Bellow's Herzog's brief visit to Poland during his lecture tour of Europe. In Tova Reich's *My Holocaust*, the first part of the novel takes place at and nearby the Auschwitz Camp Museum and in Kraków. In Steve Stern's *The Frozen Rabbi* the beginnings of the historical section of the novel are set somewhere in the Polish provinces and then in the Balut Jewish district of Łódź. Herman Wouk's protagonists of *The Winds of War* travel to Poland in September 1939 and end up spending a few weeks in the Polish-German war zone. Susan Sontag's historical novel *In America* with Polish characters begins in Poland, but most of the action takes place in the United States, where her protagonist undergoes her American

experience and transformation. In the Holocaust fiction, such as Spiegelman's *Maus*, Nathan Englander's story "The Tumblers," Cynthia Ozick's first part of *The Shawl* or Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* the action is connected with occupied Poland, but, with the exception of *Maus*, it has very little to do with Poland or Poles, as the setting is the ghettos or concentration camps created by the Nazis. In *Maus* the Polish context is more significant, though, as there is considerable interaction between Jews and Poles during the German occupation, or in the Auschwitz camp.

When it comes to Poles being main characters, this is only the case in two texts, Susan Sontag's *In America* and Bernard Malamud's short story "The Death of Me." Polishness is a quintessential quality, however, indeed almost the *sine qua non* condition of the substance of the narratives, in two other texts: Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* and Paul Auster's *Timbuctu*. In both it takes up very little space, but justifies the characters' main struggle – their maladjustment to American society and their East European alienation. Ozick tries to domesticate this alienation with the more homely title and a hint at a potential quasi happy ending, but Auster with his exotic "Timbuctu" in the title and the use of other tragic outsiders, E.A. Poe and Mr Bones, a dog, has only death as an option.

One of the problems I had to face while working on this research was when to assume that the number of novels and short stories analyzed for the purpose of the study was sufficient. The number of books within the label of Jewish American fiction is so large that there is no possibility for all of them to be included in any one project involving complete text analysis, since the reading process would be endless as well as, ultimately, counterproductive as motifs and types of reference would be repetitive in one way or another. This necessity to limit the number of books for analysis has left me with the sense that, on the one hand, I ignored some fiction by great classics such as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, or the particularly prolific Philip Roth, while, on the other hand, I under-represented the younger generation of writers who keep creating new books. In just one year, 2012, two of the writers included in this project came up with successful new collections of short stories: Steve Stern published *The Book of Mischief* and Nathan Englander *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*. In the same year Shalom Auslander, another recognized Jewish American author, published *Hope: A Tragedy*, yet another novel fantasizing about Anne Frank. Shalom Auslander's fiction was not included in this project, largely because I never aspired to include all Jewish American writers of talent. Auslander represents those significant writers who have been left out from my research because a project involving study of fiction has to have its limitations.

I have used various critical studies and reviews, by American authors and some Polish ones, all of which are mentioned in the bibliography. Two books, however, have been particularly useful as reference points in my research, Shoshanna Ronen's *Polin. A Land of Forests and Rivers. Images of Poland and Poles in Contemporary Hebrew Literature in Israel* (2007) and Danusha V. Goska's *Bieganski: The Brute Polak Stereotype, Its Role in Polish-Jewish Relations and American Popular Culture* (2010). Shoshana Ronen's *Polin* is an excellent study of Israeli literature as it relates to Poles and Poland, and has allowed me to observe some interesting similarities and differences in the approach to the same subject of literary representation of Poles and Poland in literature created by writers whose ancestors may have come from East-Central Europe. The similarities derive from the historical experience of hundreds of years of complicated Polish-Jewish coexistence as well as its tragic ending in the Holocaust, which – naturally – is shared by American and Israeli Jews. But there are many interesting differences, largely indicative of how much Jews in America are Americans, mentally affected by the openness of the multicultural society, less subject to the emotional siege syndrome of the enemy *ante portas*, which in Israel tightens the stereotypes of the Other and constrains the vision of history to the one which serves the ideological needs of the current political situation. Jewish Americans lived alongside ethnic Poles, especially in the early stages of emigration from Europe at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and this neighborhood strongly affected mutual perception, often strengthening earlier stereotypes, but sometimes establishing new modes of co-existence. In the case of Jews, their Jewish-American identity also allows for contact with Poles through the American-dominated part of the identity. At the same time many Poles of the post-war generation are unaware of Poland's Jewish past, which gives a different perspective and a platform for relations. This framework is less likely to occur in contacts between Poles and Israelis.

I have found Danusha V. Goska's book *Bieganski* useful because of her choice of the subject matter, but also controversial. The author provides a mine of information on the difficulties in Polish-Jewish relations and, even more importantly, as an American of Polish descent, the insider perspective.⁴ But I often had a sense that her vision of Poles represented exclusively as brutes, which she had extracted from American popular culture, was exaggerated. My research does not confirm it, although the explanation for this might be in the different study material, which in my project was, broadly speaking, literature

4 I should add here that, though I lived with my relatives in New York for half a year as a teenager, other than that all my subsequent visits to the United States were very brief and allowed limited personal observations; I am a scholar who works with literary materials.

from the canon, or at least partly canonical, since I included some popular writers as well. Generally we receive different visions concerning ethnic stereotypes in high and popular culture, although sometimes Leon Uris and Saul Bellow, despite belonging to very different classes of literature, drew the same picture, merely writing different sentences. But even Goska's use of the name "Bieganski" in the title of her book is controversial to me. She uses the surname of a character from William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* to stand for a Polish stereotype of an anti-Semite, like "Shylock" for a Jew (or "Sambo" to represent an Afro-American in a derogatory way). "Where Bieganski is poor, stupid and physically expressive, moneyed Shylock is excessively intelligent and inadequate in his meager physicality" (17). But Bieganski in Styron's novel is neither poor nor stupid. He is a highly intelligent and accomplished Kraków university professor, Polish nationalist, a fluent speaker of German, "a tall robust-looking man," "respected despite his extreme views – a superconservative in a faculty of right-wingers" (Styron, 290). Bieganski is a typical middle-class, educated European anti-Semite – if Germany, Austria, Holland, France and most other European countries had not been full of them⁵, the Holocaust would never have happened. He was not Poland-specific. So it seems very strange that Danusha Goska would have chosen such a literary creation as a symbol of a "strong, stupid, violent, fecund, anarchic, dirty" (16) Pole, as Styron's Biegański did not have any of these qualities. However, this peculiar choice only shows the extent of complications in mutual perceptions, with the additional contribution of William Styron, who is neither of Jewish nor Polish descent. Despite my reservations towards Goska's *Bieganski*, I have found her book useful both as a resource and to show that the quest for representation into a broader spectrum of literature will yield a different picture.

I have divided the references found in the books analyzed into two main sections: the portrayal of Poles and the memory of Poland. The portrayal results from both the common neighborhood in the new homeland of the United States and the Old World memories, enriched by contact with contemporary Poles from Poland. It is dominated by the assumption of Polish anti-Semitism and leans towards what Goska suggests is "strong, stupid, violent," but is much more complex, decidedly less one-sided than her vision and also less negative than that which has been found by Soshana Ronen in her analysis of Israeli literature.

The chapter on memory begins with recollections of Poland through various places, cities, *shtetls* and ghettos. Other subchapters analyze the concept of Poland as a place which is real, or sometimes symbolic, and entangled in the

5 T.S. Eliot and the anti-Semitic language of "Gerontion" constitute an example from the very top in the European aesthetic and intellectual achievement of the interwar years.

history of the 20th century and the Holocaust. I also attempt to see the meaning of Polishness as a Jewish inheritance, because this comes through in some of the fiction. In the last subchapter as well as in the third chapter I collect other forms of memory of the Polish past retained in Jewish-American fiction, such as certain customs or traditions. References to famous people connected with Poland, be they Polish or Jewish, are collected, to see what significance this presence of historical figures in fiction might have. There is even a small, but I believe worthy of attention, area of Polish-sounding names, which are relevant for understanding the meaning of memory. The bulk of the attention here, however, falls upon the concept of Poland as a place which is hostile and tends to be associated with death. This form of representation of Poland is not unique to Jewish-American fiction. Shoshana Ronen's picture of the representation of Poland in Israeli fiction evokes a similar image, where "Poland is associated with death and fear, but also with a lost childhood of the pre-Holocaust early days" (12). Joanna Auron-Górska, who studied photographs taken in Poland by professional Jewish photographers from Western Europe and the USA, drew a related conclusion, observing that photographic representations "visualize contemporary Poland as a sub-component in the mechanism for remembering the Shoah" while the function of Poland is that of "a *negative point of reference*"(85).

With regard to Poland Jewish American literature shows a disproportion between the extent of remembering the Holocaust and the very near obliteration from memory of the pre-Holocaust period of more than seven hundred years of Jewish settlement in the lands of Poland as well as the near-forgetting of numerous outstanding Jews, both creators of Jewish life in East-Central Europe and those assimilated, who contributed significantly to Polish culture. This disproportion indicates that when on that memorable day in the history of the 20th century, 1st September 1939, the German Army attacked Poland, it was the prelude not only to the destruction of the six million Jewish lives, but also to the erosion of memory.