

Two groups of Jews are currently making pilgrimages to Poland: bearded Hasidim who visit the graves of their spiritual leaders on the anniversary of the zaddik's death, and secular Jews visiting Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz. The Hasidim travel in highly visible and vocal groups. When they arrive at their destination -- a mostly demolished cemetery in which the grave of the holy man stands out in the desecrated landscape -- they follow a prescribed religious rite in the sacred tongue, leave petitionary notes called kvitlekh, light memorial candles, leave a stone on the grave as a reminder to the dead that he hasn't been forgotten, then return home on the first available flight. The Polish economy -- not to mention its eating establishments -- benefit little from their presence. The secular Jews, in contrast, are organized age-wise: middle aged men and women from this or that organization, and teenagers from this or that movement. They follow no fixed route or rite. The place names are inpronounceable to them; the landscape of stone, concrete and barbed wire is totally unfamiliar. They are therefore at the mercy of their guide or group leader who may either talk them to death or play to their emotions. They then return to the hotel or youth hostel where they try to dispel the gloom.

The two groups of pilgrims never meet, because they're following two different maps of Jewish history -- just as neither group ever meets up with the local population. For unlike other Jewish pilgrimage sites, like the Kotel or the Statue of Liberty, that are situated within a living and breathing mosaic of communities, Poland for the Jewish pilgrim is nothing more than a silent burial ground. But in fact there is a battle going on right now that will determine the future of the Polish-Jewish past.

- 1) Polish Hasidim and Holocaust survivors who are busy erecting or restoring their private memorials;

- 2) A handful of remaining Polish Jews and a tiny group of Polish-Christian intellectuals who, in the wake of Solidarity and the new democratic order, are trying to recreate a full-blooded Jewish past and a viable, though modest Jewish presence;

3) The vast majority of Poles who want whatever that remains to serve the sole function of Polish collective memory.

Schudrich's addage: Jewish-Polish relations = a divorced couple arguing over who inherits the burial plot.

### The Lieux de Mémoire

#### The politics of Polish memorial sights

LUBLIN: imported a huge statue of Red Army soldier to dominate Lithuania Square; demoted monument to constitution of 3 May 1791; turned Potocki palace into youth hostel; old court house into professional offices; Old Town into a slum

during Solidarity: 3 May monument became rallying point for mass protests; under constant surveillance

today: same square dominated by primitive market; but palace & court house completely restored; Old Town to be a tourist attraction

#### The Politics of Jewish Memorial Sights

Almost everything from the Stalinist-Gomulka period carries the stamp of corruption:

1. The State Yiddish Theater -- a grotesque museum piece
2. The Jewish Historical Institute
3. The Jewish Exhibit at Auschwitz
4. The Folksshtime (the only young people studying Yiddish are non-Jews!)
5. The Joint-funded soup kitchen
6. the various ghetto monuments (exc. Rappoport's which belongs to a brief postwar transition) written in Stalinese: Honor to the Polish citizens of Jewish nationality from the voivodship of Lublin who lost their life in a bestial way at the hands of the Nazi fascists during the years of the Second World War. The people of the Lublin voivodship. (1963)

the "standard tour" by Wanda, the senior guide of 15 yrs experience

#### NARRATIVE I (Auschwitz- stammlager; 2 1/2 hrs/)

camp can easily be covered in 1 visit

begin at the gate: façade of a labor camp

political prisoners & POWS

mostly Poles

BLOCK 6: living conditions; mug shots (only of non-Jews; Jews were tatoed)

NATIONAL EXHIBITS (only acceptable category until 1980s)

Bulgarian closed down due to Webber's protests

only the Dutch exhibit any good

#### DEATH BLOCK 11

execution yard w/individual hooks

flowers at the execution wall

room where SS officer sits on guard duty

kangaroo court

undressing rooms for m/w

even central heating to "obey" Geneva Convention!

underground punishment cells: Father Kolbe's cell w/John Paul's candle;

member of the Home Army (when telling this "untold story" our guide Wanda got very animated)

(RECONSTRUCTED) GALLOWS between Crematorium I / Commandant's House:  
closure, retribution

#### NARRATIVE II: HOLLOW-COST

new narrative, hasn't got it down quite so well yet

only recently can they speak of Jewish victims; but still disagree on the proportion (3/4 or 90%) [article by Polish specialist]

BLOCK 5: cannisters of cyclone B, roomsfull of human hair, combs & brushes, prosthetic devices, shoes, kettles, valises [saw many of the objects that had filled my Holocaust imagination]

BLOCK 27 "Suffering & Struggle of the Jews" 1976 doublespeak; poor man's Yad Vashem; profound sense of déjà-vu

CREMATORIUM I (rebuilt) w/GAS CHAMBER

but most of this story can only be told in Auschwitz II (BIRKENAU) which most people see (if at all) for 1/2 hr!

P.S. The cross of the Carmelite convent is barely visible; much ado about nothing

## VISIT TO BIRKENAU

the sheer vastness of this camp says it all - *was so cold, even in April, bundled up.*

Mexico (=place of abandon); Canada (=place of plenty)

commandant's house now a church w/crucifix visible everywhere

very few of the Stalin-era signs still remaining

where few ever tread: monument to Soviet POWS

trekking through the mud of Crematoria II-V; ruins of the gas chambers

mounds of forks & spoons

miles of chimneys; wood lifted for firewood

restored watch towers; rebuilt barracks - *what to do w/ "Sauna" ?*

the monument proper (April 67): last & least of all possibilities inscriptions

removed; cannot decide on the new text

A     Auschwitz  
B     Birkenau  
C     Canada

## rites & Ceremonies

Tomorrow's sun will gild our sad today  
The enemy and yesterday will fade away  
But should the dawn delay or sunrise wait too long  
Then let all future generations sing this song.

1. Visit of 700 French Jews; to commemorate Mar 27 '42, 1st train to Auschwitz from Compaigne; organized by Klarsfeld Assoc & Fils des déportés; brought w/them marble plaque to place at old ramp between Auschwitz / Birkernau; had intended to lay 73,000 roses but couldn't find nearly that number; placed a white wreath inlaid w/magen david instead; took train back the same day; also staged a protest at Carmelite monastery's presence

2. Jonathan Webber's "El malei rahamim" inside main gate house as sun set; lit glass yortsytlisht (brought from England) & recited in Ashkenazit

3. My "Zog nit keyn mol" between ruins of Crematorium IV (blown up by Sonderkommando) & ash pit pond; w/glass yorstaytlikht brought from USA; unwittingly left out most upbeat stanza; utter futility of it (singing; singing in Yiddish; singing a Yiddish hymn of the Holocaust proper; singing w/august group of Holocaust specialists only four of whom could sing w/me; made it sound even punier)

4. (crying uncontrollably) Visit of Ramatkal Barak opp. Jew. exhibit at Auschwitz and next to Carmelite monastery: Israeli HS group coincidentally there? officers from each unit; Polish cavalry guard on other flank

ישראל, ישראל, יחזק

Europe waited for this to happen; any nation could have brought it about; we came here 50 yrs too late; 3 pillars of IDF: kohenu, tsidkatenu, tvunatenu; extremely literary & dense; delivered w/real feeling

Hazzan Brown: 7th gen. sabra; recited El malei w/grandmother in mind: you can never understand; but now I can die peacefully; imp. for Jews to know that yesh lahem gav

5. spontaneous: Polish HS students: Jews on the cross; plaque to Edith Stein; ~~ap~~opstate who was later beatified

[fate of all these plaques: kept in a separate block; will they be displayed in the Sauna?]

Justice of our  
Cause  
clear  
siphon

## TWO ADDITIONAL STOPS:

German Youth Hostel -- beautifully built/kept up; presence of major of  
Oswiecim; Heubner's profound understanding of the emotional/cultural barriers

Carmelite Center for Interfaith Dialogue [show them how vast this complex will  
be]

[Should/can there be a comparable Jewish center?] *- would anyone be crazy enough  
to live there?*

## MEETING W/STAFF

describe the setting; tense negotiation between the Poles/Jews; they have  
everything to lose

sincere desire to make amends; blame everything on the Communists  
explain vast diff. between original addressee /teenage visitors of today  
want to restore a human face to the victims

new guide books, publications

extremely critical of status quo

above all else: wish to restore their CREDIBILITY

Canadian bus will enable visitors to spend time in Birkenau; committed to half-  
half

but when I asked them about a book store -- hadn't a clue!

(private conversation w/Teresa Swiebocka: planning to publish many books of  
former inmates, beg w/Night in Polish; close ties w/Yad Vashem)

Michael Shadrach's visit - no summary

tremendous dedication of Wanda (wife of a miner) who's worked there for (only) 15 yrs. Told us abt. former French inmate who lived on premises for 47 yrs & died on Sunday

2-day long DEBATE

35 people: 10 from N. America; 9 from Poland; 2 from Israel, 8 from England (but run by an Englishman)

a rare occasions in which being an intellectual isn't by definition self-defeating & superfluous; there was someone out there listening; real opportunity for our learning something too!

#### On Lieux de Mémoire



1. Diaspora politics now at a crossroads; possible to achieve true mutual understanding, at least among members of the elite
2. Jews have the moral right to reclaim their monuments
3. What Jews can achieve is, however, very limited: changing the content of the signs; adding new languages, putting better guide books in place; providing yortsyat candles for Jewish visitors, perhaps a water tap for ritual hand washing; arranging for better in-service training of guides; stopping the decay & ill-advised reconstruction; installing a conservation lab in situ
4. powerful counterweight to US Holocaust Museum: create a govt bureaucracy that works from top down, without a real constituency vs. clearly stated goals worked at from the ground up quietly & non-confrontationally
5. Jonathan the Jesuit priest of Auschwitz-Birkenau: single-mindedness & selfless zeal can achieve same results as expending vast sums of \$; brought us together to educate us through lengthy debate, group process

omit





What our group learned:

6. a lieux de mémoire is not created by fiat: exists at confluence of  
time/place/politics/personality<sub>es</sub>

7. all this bespeaks a cultural revolution w/its own hazzards: shift from text-based to land-based memory

omit 8. a tiny group of dedicated Jews are trying to restore/invent memory-sites of the future; undoing 40 yrs of systematic state plundering of the past; by modest means achieving what millions cannot do elsewhere

#### As Pilgrimage Site

Auschwitz-as-Theological Problem: (Roskies)

Holocaust as religion of secular Jews

Local museums as secular shrines ; US Holocaust Museum & its Solomonic Judgment

Treblinka-Majdanek-Auschwitz as stations of the cross

(even more the pilgrimage of the French!)

now we're fighting over the stigmata, the holy relics: half a barracks, a valise of hair, a real cattle car

Rubenstein: astonished at how his ultra-assimilated Jew. students identify with victims

Roskies: Jew as christ figure

Rubenstein: suffering without redemption

Roskies: March of the Living takes care of that;

Auschwitz-as-Demonic-Other: ma nora hamaqom hazeh!

only "camp" comparable to this one is the Ten Tribes in the wilderness w/Tent of Meeting in the middle

what meaning can be wrested from this place?

the scriptures buried underground?

little support for this position

There, in the wilderness, our people was constituted  
Here, in the Polish swamp, our people was destroyed.

[COMMENTARY]

1. A pilgrimage site (Webber, Roskies, HS students)

2. A national counter-shrine (French Jews, IDF)

1. Auschwitz-as-Holy of Holies: Jonathan Webber as High Priest; considers everything holy; cannot comprehend how peasants can mow the hay for own purposes; wrote text for all the new signs, inc. Hebrew

2. Auschwitz-as-Hollywood-set -- film crews built & destroyed their own barracks, gas chambers, etc.; knocked things about indiscriminately; fake gas chamber left standing until Jonathan raised a stink in Ministry of Culture

3. Auschwitz as site to be plundered: by peasants (whole paper on the subject distributed to all members); by US Holocaust Museum! Tale of the Solomonic Judgment. Valise full of hair shows up in the west

4. Auschwitz-as-Conservation-Problem (specialist brought in from NY); Staszek points out that 1st gen. were themselves survivors; therefore less imp. whether original materials are (re)used; for later generations "real thing" takes on greater meaning; but so much is already fake: photo of liberated children; all the watch towers; the barbed wire; the Hoess gallows

# POLAND SINCE SOLIDARITY

Solidarity-and-after:

1. Social Committee for the Preservation of Cemeteries and Monuments of Jewish Culture

2. Memorial at Kuzmir by the Vistula (Kazimierz Dolny)

3. Research Center for Jewish History and Culture in Poland ( Jagiellonian Univ )

4. Summer camps run by Lauder Foundation - special session for  HIDDEN CHILDREN

5. Synagogues used other than for museums

Ficowski's wife (abt. 50 yrs. old)

1973: you could "do" Jewish Poland in 3 days

1992: it would take 3 intensive weeks to do it justice

## SHOW & TELL

- 1) Jewish pocket guides to Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin
- 2) Illustrated/scholarly books on individual communities
- 3) museums, maps

These guides & maps cannot in/of themselves compensate for the total loss of memory & oral tradition

a "collective memory" of Polish Jewry no longer exists

What you see will ultimately depend on

--who you're with

--what you already bring to the experience →

## CRACOW: Walking w/ Raphael Scharf

1. Plaque to Benzion Rappoport's Hebrew Primary School & Boys' Handicraft School (June 1987)
2. Story of Rappoport's MS - received at Hotel Polonia

3. Temple Synagogue - recited his Hebrew bar mitsvah speech recited across the street

4. Reciting the names of the Jewish inhabitants who lived on both sides of plant area

5. Gebirtig's house at No. 5 Berek Joselevicz - his daughter Sifra; the famous whorehouse across the street: Reyzele, Kinder-yorn, Kum Leybke tantsn, Es brent!

[No Jew rides in a droszky without a parcel by his side: can you imagine a policeman with an umbrella? or a whore wearing glasses?]

### LUBLIN: Walking w/Jolla

born/bred in the city; knows it in/out

but her only source on the Jews is a book Moj Lublin, written in Israel, & given her by her non-Jewish friend Monika who studied Yiddish here in NY

1. Yeshiva of Khokhmei Lublin (1924-1930), Meyer Shapiro, inventor of daf yomi; showpiece of Agudas Yisroel w/ scale model of Temple in Jerusalem

2. Ghetto Monument: the story of its design (not in the guide book)

3. The Old Cemetery & the legend of the sinking church (diff. from the guide book's)

4. Lublin Municipal Museum: painstaking restoration of the 1418 Byzantine frescoes in the gothic chapel

5. Restored painting by Jan Matejko (discovered in 1967)

6. Young curator buying up Judaica for a NY gallery but has no \$ to buy any artifacts for her own museum!

7. Dominican Church w/ symmetrical altars → locked up after robbery of piece of cross

### JEWES OF WOOD

1. Musicians

2. Rabbis

3. Pious Jews (w/ 107 x 50) carrying ... bag of gold!

### 3. Pious Jew carrying bag of gold...

The two poles of Jewish memory: In April 1943, in the midst of the Uprising, Michael Zylberberg found himself hiding on the Aryan Side, eager to leave the city at any price

Suddenly I heard someone from the queue asking the booking clerk for a ticket "Do Cadyka" -- "to the Rabbi." Another man did the same. For a second I was stupefied, then I realized they meant a ticket to the town of Ger (Gor Kalvaria), which, before the war, had been the home of a very famous Chassidic Rabbi. The clerk showed no surprise at their request; he understood it well." (A Warsaw Diary 1939-1945, p. 97)

At the other pole: Gradowski reports that he met a woman on her way to the gas who cursed the memory of the Gerer rebbe: He had urged the Jews to stay in Poland...

That gas chamber is the end point. Whatever pilgrimages set out for Ger today must happen against the backdrop of that colossal failure.

Challenge Eleanor Munro: jewish pilgrimage takes place on an historical trajectory; against Art Green and all those others of my friends who would wipe the slate clean and set out on a mystical journey instead. Revelation in/through history. That is the meaning of those pilgrimages to Auschwitz: the French, the Israelis, the academics.