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Patterns of Return
Survivors' Postwar Journeys to Poland

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When I returned home from the camp, our shtetl was completely empty. I looked at houses that didn't look like houses, at streets that didn't look like streets and I saw people who didn't look like people.... In Grobelna Street there was a synagogue that wasn't there, but it was the only thing that existed for me—as did our one-story house, which wasn't there either. ¹

This seemingly surrealist excerpt comes from the 1986 novel *Ocaleni* (The Survivors) by the Polish-Jewish writer Stanisław Benski. Let us juxtapose it with a quotation from Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1959 story "Mayse Tishevits," known in English as "The Last Demon": "I can't find a single one of our men. The cemetery is empty.... The community was slaughtered, the holy books burned, the cemetery desecrated.... Gentiles wash themselves in the ritual bath. Abraham Zalman's chapel has been turned into a pigsty." ² We find similar images in numerous works in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew,

NOTES

1. Stanisław Benski, *Ocaleni* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1986), 6.

2. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Last Demon" in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982), 186.

or English by both Jewish and non-Jewish writers. Many of these works focus on the former Jewish quarter in Warsaw, but smaller cities, towns, and villages are depicted as well.

The former Warsaw ghetto brings to mind a moonscape; all of Warsaw was razed to the ground. But even in the towns where little or no physical destruction occurred, the changes are enormous—especially for a Jewish visitor or a more than usually perceptive and empathetic local Gentile.

Numerous works depict Jews' returns to Poland or elsewhere in Eastern Europe.³ The earliest of them date to the summer of 1944, when the eastern territories of present-day Poland were liberated from the Nazis and taken over by the Soviets. The most recent have appeared over the last two decades, as more and more Jewish visitors travel to Poland to visit the sites of former Nazi camps and ghettos and to search for their roots. Such accounts appear in the form of books, articles, essays, and poems, most of them in English or Hebrew. Many of these are produced by professional writers and journalists, but some are written by amateurs. There are numerous oral testimonies as well.⁴

For this lecture, however, I shall focus on narratives from *yizkor bikher* (Jewish memorial books) written in Yiddish and covering some of the territories of present-day Poland—in particular those areas that belonged to Poland both before and after the war. In other areas, especially those incorporated into the Soviet Union, both Jews and non-Jews experienced enormous displacement, as Shimon Redlich demonstrates in his book on the town of Brzezany.⁵

3. Of particular importance are journalistic books in Yiddish by Mordekhai Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok: A rayze iber hundert horuv-gevorene kehilos in Poyln* (Tel Aviv: Letste Naves, 1952); Jacob Pat, *Ash un fayer* (New York: CYCO, 1946) and its English-language edition *Ashes and Fire*, translated by Leo Steinberg (New York: International Universities Press, 1947); Shmuel Leyb Shneiderman, *Tsvishn shrek un hofenung: A rayze iber dem nayem Poyln* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1947) and *Ven di Vaysl hot geredt Yidish* (Tel Aviv: Y. L. Perets, 1970) and its English-language version *The River Remembers* (New York: Horizon Press, 1978).

4. Alina Skibińska has conducted thorough research on returns of survivors to the Warsaw district in the period from 1944 to 1950 using archival sources including transcripts of oral testimonies. See her “Powroty ocalałych” (manuscript) to be published in *Prowincja noc: Życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim 1939–1945*, prepared by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research in Warsaw.

Why Yizkor Books?

Yizkor books are a rich but a rather neglected body of works. They are little known despite the fact that some of them are still being produced or reproduced in English or in other languages.⁶ Those few scholars who conduct research using yizkor books tend to concentrate on the prewar period or the Holocaust. Although it is true that most yizkor books deal with the postwar years only briefly, it is important to note that almost every yizkor book includes a description of that period. Sometimes the section consists of a one-page report by a single author, and sometimes, as in the *Pinkas Zhiradov* (Żyrardów), several reports by various authors cover a total of some forty pages. Most of these reports were composed with other former inhabitants of the localities in mind. Even if they are written from a slightly ideological viewpoint—to justify *aliyah* to Israel or emigration to the West, for instance—they accurately capture the moods and feelings of their authors.

Some important research has been done on the postwar period in Poland. Scholars cite a number of reasons why the Jewish community was not rebuilt on a large scale in Poland.⁷ Theoretically, such a possibility existed; attempts were made to rebuild after the war, and I believe that if Poland had become a democratic country and

5. Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

6. The most valuable comprehensive study of yizkor books in English, which includes a selection of texts, is *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, ed. and transl. Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, 2nd expanded edn. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998; published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). It includes a valuable bibliography and a geographical index by Zachary M. Baker. It also contains a section on “Returns”—altogether seven texts or their fragments from yizkor books of Tarnogród, Bełchatów, Żelechów, Biłgoraj, Żyrardów, Mińsk Mazowiecki and Ryki.

7. See for example Józef Adelson, “W Polsce zwanej Ludową” in *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce w zarysie (do 1950 roku)*, ed. Jerzy Tomaszewski (Warsaw: PWN, 1993); Natalia Aleksyńska, *Dokąd dalej? Ruch syjonistyczny w Polsce (1944–1950)* (Warsaw: TRIO, 2002); David Engel, “Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944–1946,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 26 (1998): 43–85; Daniel Blatman, “The Encounter between Jews and Poles in Lublin District after Liberation, 1944–1945,” *East European Politics and Societies* 20, no. 4 (2006): 598–621; Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 2006); Bożena Szaynok, “The Role of Antisemitism in Postwar Polish-Jewish Relations” in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, ed. Robert Blobaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 265–283.

been covered under the Marshall Plan, we might have a sizeable Jewish community there today.

Survivors and historians of the postwar period cite the following reasons for the Jews' departure from Poland:⁸

1. Psychological: Poland was perceived as a cemetery. The Nazis established most of their ghettos as well as their labor and death camps there, and it was natural for survivors to want to escape from places associated with traumatic memories.
2. Political: with the imposition of communism, and especially in the late 1940s under Stalinism, all Jewish political parties were dissolved and independent political life was stifled.
3. Religious: with the imposition of communism, religious freedom was restricted; observant Jews felt they could not make their homes in Poland.
4. Economic: the search for a better life was often connected to the political situation. We must remember that before the war many Jews were merchants, shopkeepers, and artisans. With the imposition of communism and its restrictions on private ownership, many of these Jews could no longer practice their occupations.
5. Fear of antisemitism, especially its violent manifestations: the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 created an atmosphere of panic and drove thousands of survivors to leave—including many who had been planning to stay.
6. The creation of the state of Israel: in particular, Jews with Zionist views considered it their duty to leave for Eretz Yisroel, and Zionist organizations expended great effort to encourage Jews to make *aliyah*.

With the obvious exceptions of the establishment of the state of Israel and fear of antisemitism, these reasons were common to both Jews and non-Jews. A great number of non-Jewish Polish citizens, too, emigrated to the West or chose not to return to Poland after the war.⁹

8. I am not listing these categories in order of importance as there is no general consensus in this matter. For example, Gross cites fear as the main reason for Jews' departure from Poland after the war while Aleksiu mentions Zionist activities in Poland and establishment of the state of Israel.

9. At certain times it was easier for Jews than for non-Jews to emigrate from Poland. In light of the political oppression and economic problems facing the country, numerous Polish citizens were interested in emigrating.

Purely historical research rarely examines individuals' feelings and choices. My aim here is to explore individual survivors' perceptions of the landscape after the *khurban*¹⁰ (the Yiddish term widely used to denote the Holocaust)—as well as their experiences, feelings, and choices—in order to paint a nuanced picture.

Who are the authors of these reports? Among them we find Polish soldiers who survived the war by escaping to the Soviet Union and who then returned to Poland with the Polish army¹¹ to fight alongside the Red Army; survivors who returned from camps, and some who survived in hiding in their hometowns or in partisan units. Some write after having spent several years in Israel, America, Australia, South Africa, or Western Europe, while others write while languishing in DP camps. Still others—those who remained in Poland, although not necessarily in their hometowns or cities—visit their former homes at the request of yizkor book editorial committees. To return was a natural impulse. One returned to find out whether any family members or friends had survived, to see one's home, to decide what to do next.

Returnees' First Impressions

Looking over the body of testimony from yizkor books as a whole, we see that the Jewish visitor usually makes the journey by train, which in itself can be a traumatic experience. Usually he or she is warned by other Jews that it is not safe to travel in the region, especially in 1945 and 1946 when Jews frequently were the target of attacks. No wonder that some Jews travel in disguise. A traveler to Tarnogród in 1945 goes so far as to shave his beard and grow a long mustache to look like a Polish peasant, donning a peasant cap and boots for good measure.¹² A traveler to Pruszków near

10. The literal meaning of the term is destruction.

11. The Polish Army was created in the Soviet Union in 1943/4 and operated under the auspices of the Red Army. It consisted primarily of Poles who had been deported deep into the USSR after the Soviets took over eastern Poland on the basis of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Almost forty percent of its officers and technical specialists were Soviets, while for command staff and training officers the proportion reached seventy to eighty-five percent. This was inevitable, as the natural cadre of Polish officers who could have fulfilled these roles had been eliminated in the Katyn massacre in 1940 or joined the army of Polish refugees in the Soviet Union, a force organized by Lieutenant General Władysław Anders. In Polish public opinion, Polish Army officers were generally viewed as Russians in Polish uniforms.

12. Nokhem Krumerkop, "Searching for the Life that Was" in *Sefer Tarnograd: Le zikaron ha-kehilah ha-yehudit she-nehrevah*, ed. Sh. Kanc (Tel Aviv: Organization of Former Residents of

Warsaw feels relatively safe due to his good command of Polish, devoid of Yiddish accent. But he still has to listen to Poles complaining that Jews “are returning en masse from Russia and polluting the holy Polish soil.”¹³ Even in later years, when it is no longer dangerous, the train is usually half empty and the returnee is surrounded by unfamiliar faces—so different from prewar times, when there were many Jewish passengers. Yosele Yakubovitz states in his report from November 1960: “As I approached Żyrardów by train I immediately felt alienated. I saw that my hometown was not mine. The platform had changed though the station was the same.... There was not a familiar face to be seen. No one paid any attention to me. No one was waiting for me. No one imagined that I was a native returning to my hometown. No one was interested.”¹⁴ In their imagination, returnees compare such returns to those that took place before the war, when someone who emigrated or left to find work would return to his or her hometown to a warm welcome.

The first thing that strikes the returnee at the train station is the absence of Jewish *balegoles* (carriage drivers) or porters. In some places there is no one to help you get from the station into the town; in others familiar Jewish drivers are now replaced by Gentile ones. Moreover, the station itself is now deserted. In the past it would have been full of Jewish travelers or, in winter, young Jewish couples seeking shelter from the cold.

Some travelers are so anxious to get to their hometowns that they go on foot, covering even as much as eighty kilometers; Moshe Rapaport walked from Lublin to Bilgoraj (Biłgoraj) just before Rosh Hashanah in 1944.¹⁵ Others are so eager to see their former homes that they go by taxi, as did Yakov Handshtok from Ryki, who

Tarnograd and Vicinity in Israel, the United States, and England, 1966). In *From a Ruined Garden*, 243–44.

13. Menashe Opozdover, “Bletlekh geshikhte fun der alter heym,” in *Sefer Pruszkow, Nadzin ve-ha-sevihah*, ed. D. Brodsky (Tel Aviv: Former Residents of Pruszkow in Israel, 1967), 54–55.

14. Yosele Yakubovitz, “Sof posek...” in *Pinkas Żyrardow, Amshinov un Viskit*, ed. M. W. Bernstein (Buenos Aires: Association of Former Residents in the USA, Israel, France, and Argentina, 1961), 599.

15. Moshe Rapaport, “A bazukh in mayn shtetele Bilgoraj,” in *Khurbn Bilgoraj*, ed. A. Kronenberg (Tel Aviv, Hapoel Hamizrachi, 1956), 130.

during his wanderings in Soviet Russia never stopped dreaming of his hometown.¹⁶ Or, if they are privileged, survivors go by state-owned car. Aryeh Shtuntseyger, an officer in the Polish army, traveled in this way to Krasnystaw in November 1944, accompanied by his aide-de-camp.¹⁷

In their travels, the returnees usually encounter fellow Jewish survivors. These encounters are often warm, even heart-breaking. In some cases, the visitors realize only after some time has passed that the person they have met is Jewish, too. For example, while traveling to Zamość in the fall of 1945, survivor Helene Shefner shares an otherwise empty compartment with one other passenger—a young man, with whom she does not exchange a single word. “I did not want to speak about my Zamość with a strange Pole,” she writes, “knowing at the outset that not only will he not understand me, but he will not want to understand me.”¹⁸ Just a couple of hours later, the Polish overseer of the station in Trawniki, taking her for a Christian, expresses surprise that she is interested in a place where “only” Jews had been murdered. Shefner realizes only after that encounter, and after the young man warns her that traveling in those parts is dangerous, that her fellow passenger is Jewish as well. In Ryki, a returnee who was investigated by a local police officer for taking photographs of various objects realizes that the officer is a Jew “living behind an Aryan mask.”¹⁹ Encounters between two Jewish survivors can be bitter; it sometimes happens that Jews accuse each other of having survived at the expense of their relatives or friends.

Those who survived the war in the Soviet Union, where they had heard some reports but no details of the calamities, are particularly likely to delude themselves that perhaps the destruction was not so great or so total. One of these survivors is Menashe Opozdover from Pruszków, who writes: “With the advance of the Soviet Army there

16. Yakov Handshtok, “Oyf di shpurn fun farshvundn yidish lebn” in *Yizker-bukh tsum fareybikn dem ondenk fun der horev-gevorener yidisher kehile Ryki*, ed. Sh. Kanc (Tel Aviv: Ryki Societies in Israel, Canada, Los Angeles, France, and Brazil, 1973), 549.

17. Aryeh Shtuntseyger, “Mayn letzte bazukh in Krasnistav” in *Yisker tsum ondenk fun kdoyshy Krasnistav*, ed. A. Shtuntseyger (Munich: “Bafreyung” Poalei Zion, 1948), 136.

18. Helene Shefner, “Zamoshtsh 1945,” in *Pinkes Zamoshtsh: Yizker bukh*, ed. M.W. Bernstein (Buenos Aires: Committee of the Zamosc Memorial Book, 1957), 1193.

19. Handshtok, “Oyf di shpurn,” 556.

came the first sad news of the liquidation of Polish Jewry. We listened to it on the radio but [learned about it] mostly from letters of the Jewish soldiers at the front. In spite of that I believed that a number of Warsaw Jews had survived, and soon after the liberation of Warsaw I wrote letters to the Pruszków magistrate, the priest, and a Christian friend.”²⁰ But when he finally arrives in Pruszków in late spring 1946, Opozdover is overwhelmed by contradictory feelings of closeness and estrangement. It seems to him that “this is the same Pruszków, the same streets, trees, and houses—everything has remained as it was, but still it is somehow different. Cold.”²¹

Yakov Handshtok’s report from Ryki is similar and perhaps even closer to Benski’s literary representation: “I couldn’t believe that I was really in Ryki.... Perhaps this isn’t Ryki? Perhaps I arrived at another town by mistake?”²² It seems to him that having lost its “Jewish soul,” the town has regressed by hundreds of years to a time when it was just a small village.

Upon arrival, Jewish returnees take a walk through their former hometowns. They go first to the market square, which in most cases is abandoned, or has only a few non-Jewish businesses. In some cases, though, the square is lively and has been spruced up as if nothing had happened. Though there are new signs on stores, here and there one can still see signs with the names of former Jewish owners or even the remains of placards in Yiddish. Some authors give only a general picture of the town, while others, including Avrum Zimler from Żyrardów, note every single house and store. Zimler ends each paragraph with the refrain “haynt iz keyner fun zey nishto” (today none of them is there).²³

Some visitors remark that because those places have been deprived of their Jewish souls, they now seem to be dead or immersed in a deep sleep. Survivors imagine that they feel the thousands of pairs of eyes of the martyrs watching them, or hear the victims’ cries from each stone in each wall. When Naftali Fayershteyn looks into the

20. Opozdover, “Bletlekh,” 54.

21. *Ibid.*, 55.

22. Handshtok, “Oyf di shpurn,” 549.

23. Avrum Zimler, “Oyf di hurves fun mayn heym,” in *Pinkas Żyrardow, Amshinov un Viskit*, 587–94.

well in the market square in his native Kazimierz on the Vistula (Yid. Kuzmir), it seems to him that instead of water, the well is full of Jewish blood.²⁴

Returnees' first impressions of the town, the market square, the main street differ depending on whether a town was destroyed during the war or remained intact. Some towns are empty and deserted, left in ruins, but others are unexpectedly lively—moreso even than before the war. For example, returning to Jędrzejów in the fall of 1945, Yitzkhok Riterband arrives at a station packed with male and female smugglers laden with their wares, waiting for a train to Zagłębie. Moreover, it seems to him that there are more inns and restaurants in the towns than there had been before the war, most of them full of *goyim* drinking vodka and eating sausages.²⁵ In Pruszków, Opozdover perceives everything as more beautiful than it had been before. The town “is sunken in greenery, a delight for the eyes.”²⁶ In contrast, Shefner remarks that the city of Zamość, on the surface untouched by the war, is “enveloped in a deep silence ... an ‘unnatural’ one—a silence that it seems one can touch with one’s hand. The houses, the streets, the city square with the town hall in the middle—everything stands as it did before, but as if ossified. Zamość did not suffer externally from the operations of the war, nor during the *aktionen*, but the deadly silence that I encountered was so shocking, so suffocating, that one would have thought the air had been removed.”²⁷

When Avrum-Yitzkhok Keyman visits Łomża on February 21, 1951 (he even mentions the exact hour of the train’s departure from Warsaw and arrival in Łomża), he finds the town still largely in ruins, with very few people in residence: “only cats, dogs, chickens.”²⁸ For him, the absence of Jews means the absence of life. Small wonder that the lack of familiar Jewish faces makes most survivors feel alien and out of place. Some declare that these towns no longer exist for the Jews.

24. Naftali Fayershtayn, “Kuzmir 1944” in *Pinkas Kuzmir*, ed. D. Shotkfish (Tel Aviv: Former Residents of Kazimierz in Israel and Diaspora, 1970), 560.

25. Yitzkhok Riterband, “A bazukh in mayn horever heym” in *Sefer ha-zikaron le-yehudi Jedrzejow*, ed. Sh. D. Yerushalmi (Tel Aviv: Former Residents of Jedrzejow in Israel, 1965), 255.

26. Opozdover, “Bletlekh,” 57.

27. Helene Shefner, “Zamoshtsh 1945,” 1194.

28. Avrum-Yitzkhok Keyman, “Khurbn Lomzhe” in *Lomzhe: Ir oyfkum un untergang*, ed. H. Sabatka (New York: American Committee for the Book of Lomza, 1957), 300.

Encounters with Poles

One may ask why, in many places, returnees encountered so few Polish acquaintances. In some *shtetlekh*—especially those in which the majority of inhabitants before the war were Jewish—most new residents are strangers who had lived in surrounding villages or were resettled from more distant places. These people appropriated deserted Jewish homes or were placed in them by the Nazis or by the new Polish authorities.

In most instances, however, the survivors come across former Polish acquaintances. Sometimes the returnees are recognized first by local non-Jews. For example, in Zamość, Shefner is stopped by an elderly Pole who asks her politely if she is the daughter of a man named Ashkenazi; Avrum Zimler of Żyrardów is greeted by a young man who tells him that his mother-in-law would be very happy to see him. In other cases, the survivors have to explain to local passersby who they are. Positive encounters with non-Jews are sometimes recorded in detail: Opozdover describes three friendly and moving meetings which, however, serve only as partial consolation for him.

Often the survivors are greeted with the question: “So you’re alive?” This question can be asked in a multitude of ways, expressing hostility, resentment, disappointment, or joy. Sometimes it is hard for the survivor to interpret the tone. Shefner writes in reaction to hearing the question from an elderly Pole: “Was he happy that he had noticed a familiar Jewish girl, or did he wonder how such a thing could have occurred? I could in no way read the answer to this in his face.”²⁹ In some instances Poles’ hostility to Jews is unmistakable: on occasion the survivors hear accusations that Jews are responsible for the introduction of communism to Poland. Worse still, especially when they travel in disguise, survivors hear horrifying comments to the effect that Poles should be grateful to the Germans for getting rid of the Jews.

Some of their Christian acquaintances, without being asked, tell the survivors about the terrible things the Germans did and stress that they themselves did not take part in robbery or murder. Some such stories are convincing, especially when survivors see the poverty in which their interlocutors live. But others sound insincere—the more so when the survivors recognize furniture, bedding, or dishes that belonged to their families or friends. Many Jewish returnees hear of Poles’ suffering, too. Upon his

29. Shefner, “Zamoshtsh 1945,” 1194.

return, Opozdover is greeted warmly by a Christian acquaintance whom he does not recognize at first, so changed is the man by his experience as a slave laborer. This is one of those rare instances in which a Jewish survivor realizes that although on the grand scale the Jews' suffering was incomparably greater than that of ethnic Poles, in individual cases this question was much more complicated.

Though some Christians warn Jews against moving back to their hometowns, it happens on occasion that locals welcome the returning Jews. The people of Żyrardów hope that the Jewish survivor will take over as landlord to care for the building in which they are renting apartments. With the imposition of the communist system, ownership was transferred to the city and now the building suffers neglect.

On occasion returnees hear complaints that their towns are dead without Jews, devoid of their former vibrancy. A visitor to Łomża overhears the conversation of some young women from the nearby shtetl of Jedwabne, where in July 1941 a group of local Poles organized a pogrom/massacre and burnt alive several hundred Jewish inhabitants of the town in a barn. The women comment that now, after the destruction of the Jews, there is no life and no work. Moreover, there is no light in their shtetl, as it was the Jewish miller who had supplied the inhabitants with electricity.³⁰

A survivor's meeting with a Polish friend in Ryki is dramatic in a different way. The Pole, who helped Jews during the war, now mourns the destruction and blames himself for not having done more. He says with a look of terror on his face: "We have sinned against Jews, against God. You think people don't know. More than one Christian told me that he was terrified of the punishment that may come down on us.... It's true, it can yet come—it can."³¹ The survivor senses similar terror in the words of another Pole, but he has some suspicions as to their sincerity. Later he hears stories about spirits in the town who want to take revenge.

Stories of vengeful spirits circulate long after the war. In Ostrołęka in 1957 and 1958, nine fires break out within three months. Locals claim that this is the revenge of Jewish martyrs; during the war Christian wagon drivers robbed some Jews as they were being deported by the Nazis. These rumors spread far beyond Ostrołęka. Finally it was

30. Keyman, "Khurbn Lomzhe," 300. On Jedwabne, see Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

31. Handshtok, "Oyf di shpurn," 554.

revealed that the arsonist was a frustrated young local man whose mother had forced him to marry a girl he did not love. The author of the report quotes a Polish newspaper article that sounds amusing from today's perspective, as it criticizes the local branch of the Communist Party and local factory managers for failing to enlighten the superstitious population of the region.³²

For the Jewish visitor, the ubiquitous crosses and holy icons that mark both private homes and stores are inescapable. Reading survivors' reports on their bitter thoughts associated with Christian symbols, a non-Jewish reader may better understand why the sign of the crucifix has become such a bone of contention in Christian-Jewish relations (as we saw clearly in the debates of the late 1980s and 1990s over the convent and crosses at Auschwitz). A terrible sight for returnees is that of former communal buildings—synagogues, study houses, *mikvehs* (ritual baths), and the like. Many of these buildings were wholly or partially destroyed, first by the Nazis and later by locals who dismantled them for building material. Looking down, the visitor suddenly realizes that he is stepping on Jewish tombstones that the Nazis or the local non-Jewish population used to improve the muddy roads and streets. But it is the cemeteries that are most horrifying to see: they are desecrated, with chickens or goats grazing in them. With the streets paved with gravestones bearing inscriptions in Hebrew letters it is as if the whole town were a vast Jewish graveyard. The contrast is even more dramatic as most churches and Christian cemeteries survive relatively intact.

Desecration can assume the most unexpected form. A survivor in Bilgoray enters a shop to buy some butter, and it is handed to him wrapped up in “sheets from the Vilna edition of the Talmud. [He stands] as if petrified, remembering how hard it had been for a Jew to buy a Vilna Talmud for his learned son-in-law.”³³ He throws the butter away and hides the scraps of the holy text.

Most survivors leave their hometowns never to return. Yet some of them do decide to stay. Quite often, those who remain are married to the Christians who had saved their lives during the war. Though some of these survivors convert, a few continue to observe Jewish traditions. Those who do so are in an especially difficult situation as they feel alienated from most of the Christian community, but are treated

32. Unsigned (“From a Landsman”) “Heyntike Ostrolenke” in *Sefer kehilat Ostrolenka*, ed. Y. Ivri (Tel Aviv: Association of Former Residents of Ostrolenka, 1963), 433–34.

33. Rapaport, “A bazukh in mayn shtetele,” 132.

with suspicion by fellow Jews who are preparing to leave. What makes these survivors stay, apart from the obvious cases in which there are family ties? Some have no strength to start their lives anew; others have relatively good jobs under the new system, or consider themselves “ambassadors,” “Jewish addresses,” “Jewish communities”—ironically speaking—or “guardians of the graves.” Among them there are a few shady characters who earn money from Jews living abroad by pretending that they are caring for formerly Jewish properties or communal buildings.

What are the predominant feelings of the returnees apart from shock, sadness, and abandonment? They lament the loss of their world and express anger at the perpetrators and their accomplices. They see the beloved places of their recent past as cursed and add their own curses to them. On leaving Krasnystaw, Aryeh Shtuntseyger remarks: “When the car moved on, a heavy curse came out of my chest, a curse without an address, which should rest upon the place where those who contributed to the destruction tread. But this undefined curse has caused even more pain to my soul.”³⁴ Similarly, Naftali Fayershteyn writes after a short stay in his hometown in the fall of 1944: “After my visit to Kuzmir, I started hating all its history, historical landmarks, inhabitants, painters and sculptors, everybody, everybody with no exception.”³⁵

Instead of cursing their hometowns, some returnees resort to irony (“Yes, our shtetl has remained intact.... There are just no Jews there”³⁶) or bitterly appeal to their Christian former neighbors: “You live in our homes, you sleep in our beds and you use our bedding, you wear our clothes—at least do not obliterate our holy places!”³⁷ Many find consolation in the conviction that the time has come to separate from the past and to focus on settlement in the Land of Israel, to “commemorate and continue the golden chain of Polish Jewry.”³⁸

34. Shtuntseyger, “Mayn letzte bazukh,” 141.

35. Fayershteyn, “Kuzmir 1944,” 561.

36. Avrum Shulevitz, “Undzer shtetl iz geblibn gants,” in *Pinkas Zyrardow, Amshinov un Viskit*, 584.

37. Yosef Reykh, “Belkhatov on yidn,” in *Belchatov yisker-bukh* (Buenos Aires: Association of Polish Jews in Argentina, 1951), 504.

38. Opozdover, “Bletlekh,” 57.

Others seek consolation in taking revenge on Polish or Volksdeutsch collaborators. They track down the guilty parties and bring them to trial. In his acts of vengeance, a survivor from Bilgoray finds an answer to the question of why he had survived and his relative had not.³⁹ In the testimony of a survivor from Częstochowa the word *nekome* (revenge) appears a few dozen times, almost as a refrain, and the text ends with a repetition of the title: “Revenge is Sweet.”⁴⁰ In a different kind of effort to reach resolution, some survivors return to help exhume the bodies of victims and have them properly buried at Jewish cemeteries, or to install monuments or memorial plaques.

The Political Context

What strikes the contemporary reader about most reports is their lack of reference to the ongoing political changes in Poland. Only in one early report from Zamość do we find a comment that Poles believed that the Soviets would leave Poland quickly; the author remarked that the Poles hoped to build a “new and beautiful Poland”⁴¹ after the Soviet withdrawal. Moreover, survivors tended to perceive all armed resistance units, regardless of their political orientation, as antisemitic and aimed primarily at murdering Jews—as if combating the Soviet occupation were a matter of a marginal importance. This tendency is in keeping with Israeli historian Daniel Blatman’s observation that “in contrast to the accepted image, most Jewish survivors avoided politics altogether and were indifferent to any sort of government ideology. They were also unconcerned about the surrounding Polish society and busied themselves with the matter of greatest concern to them: the attempt to find a new channel for their devastated lives.”⁴² Similarly, Polish historian Bożena Szaynok notes that “for the majority of Jews, Polish issues were of marginal importance.” In a 1995 interview with Szaynok, Hana Szłomi, a member of an active Zionist group, remarked: “We were not seeking a solution for Poland, we were seeking a solution for ourselves. Those were Polish problems, Polish

39. B. Vermut, “Ikh bin geblibn lebn bekodey tsu nemen nekome,” in *Khurbn Bilgoraj*, 281–88. The title means “I have remained alive in order to take revenge.”

40. [Author’s name not given] “Nekome iz zis” in *Tschenstokhover yidn*, ed. R. Mahler (New York: United Czestochower Relief Committee and Ladies Auxiliary, 1947), 243–46.

41. Yekutiel Tsvilikh, “Zamoshtsh nokh khurbn” in *Pinkes Zamoshtsh*, 1180.

42. Blatman, “Encounter between Jews and Poles,” 621.

matters, and I didn't concern myself with them."⁴³ But we may add that, understandably, Jewish survivors were not indifferent to government propaganda when it concerned their personal safety. As Szaynok observes, "Jews often accepted the claim of communist propaganda that those responsible for anti-Jewish actions were the same groups that refused to recognize the authority of the new regime."⁴⁴ This issue constitutes one of the most difficult matters in Polish-Jewish relations after the war. Most striking is the fact that in many of the testimonies found in yizkor books, survivors refer to all resistance units, regardless of their political goals, as "facists bands"—the term used for them in official communist propaganda.

While reports from the mid-1940s are almost uniform in mood and details, those from the late 1950s vary substantially. Returns increased after 1956 and the so-called "Gomułka thaw." (Between 1948 and 1955, the worst period of Stalinism, very few people could leave or enter Poland.) On the one hand, we have a report from Żyrardów describing life as almost normal; on the other we have a report from Jedwabne telling us that the road to the town is dangerous because—as the visitor is made to believe—there are armed units still fighting in the area.⁴⁵

In both cases the visitors, former inhabitants of the towns, come to mark the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. But one is a guest of Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz. At that time there were no longer any resistance units fighting in the area, but it seems that the authorities informed the visitor that it was still dangerous to travel there and even assigned him some guards. The authorities may have wanted to prevent any personal encounters between the Jewish returnee and the local inhabitants, as the latter had knowledge of the July 1941 pogrom in Jedwabne—a taboo topic for the general public. The other returnee, traveling on his own, visits some Jewish families in Żyrardów who are faring quite well. He is treated to a lavish traditional dinner of chicken soup with dumplings, two types of fish, and roast goose. His Jewish host has

43. Szaynok, "Role of Antisemitism," 268.

44. *Ibid.*, 270.

45. Hersh Cinowitz, "Yedwabne after the War, April 1958" in *Sefer Jedwabne: Historiyah ve-zikaron*, ed. Julius L. Baker, Jacob L. Baker (Jerusalem: Yedvabner Societies in Israel and in the United States of America, 1980), 104–106.

traveled to Israel and France to visit his relatives. Here, then, life looks almost normal. But this does not make the encounter more joyful.⁴⁶

A few isolated reports have appeared from the Stalinist period, but most of these are ideologically biased. For example, in one of the Warsaw yizkor books Pinye Katz draws a highly positive picture of Jewish life in Poland at that time, claiming that there are no traces of antisemitism. Yiddish culture flourishes there even more than it had before the war, he argues, as writers who were once ostracized for their communist views now have their books published in numerous copies.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Most scholars agree that yizkor books present a rather idealized picture of prewar Jewish life. Perhaps it seemed improper to survivors to write negatively about the *kdoyshim*, or holy martyrs. Narratives of the Holocaust, by contrast—especially those written in Yiddish in the early postwar years—are as a rule matter-of-fact and full of concrete details, including exact dates, place names, and numbers of victims. Their authors' intention was to offer factual testimony. One may then ask whether the narratives covering the postwar years are not excessively dramatic, as if to create a reverse mirror of prewar life. Such a tendency would be quite understandable given the context in which the reports were written. As the remnants of their communities—modern Jobs—the survivors imagine themselves ghosts or shadows; they sometimes try to capture their experiences and express their feelings using religious texts. Moreover, especially when they encounter hostility or cannot find any of the people closest to them, they despair: “I survived a terrible night, more terrible than nights in Majdanek and Auschwitz, where I spent almost two years,” says a visitor to Żelechów.⁴⁸ They expected the most terrible things in the camps, but not in the seemingly serene surroundings of their own hometowns. Such feelings are voiced by Dov Zielonka, who considers his arrival in Kalisz (Kalish) to be the worst moment in his life: “What was I

46. Yakubovitz, “Sof posek,” 598–602.

47. Tsalel Blitz, “50 varshever yorn inem lebn fun der yidisher literature” in *Pinkes Varshe*, ed. P. Katz et al. (Buenos Aires: Former Residents of Warsaw and Surroundings in Argentina, 1955), col. 543–44.

48. Hanke Ashlak, “Mayn tragishe nakht in Zhelekhov,” *Yisker-bukh fun der Zhelekhover yiddisher kehile*, ed. W. Yassni (Chicago: Former Residents of Zelechov in Chicago, 1953), 318.

to do? I had reached my destination. Here I was in Kalish. I had managed to survive to the end of the war. Was this the life that would follow? Why, no one in the world needed me, I was without a penny in my pocket, ill, in rags and tatters, without a roof over my head.”⁴⁹

Some survivors were conscious of their hypersensitivity to their surroundings. Upon visiting Ostrołęka in the mid-1980s, Mark Rakowski admits that he is driven as if by a kind of megalomania: “I am the sole Jewish wanderer, who treads on the ashes of his martyred ones and cannot find consolation. I am the modern Job, bemoaning his bitter fate, the destruction of his people, his family, relatives, and friends. I am the burning bush, who is burning and is not consumed.”⁵⁰

Many are appalled to find that the places of their past have remained and that life goes on there despite the destruction of the Jews: “While the train with my brothers went away to Auschwitz or Treblinka or Majdanek, the city remained whole, with its inhabitants, theaters, a lively market,” writes Chaim Shoshkes about his hometown of Rzeszów (Yid. Reyshe) after visiting it in 1960.⁵¹ As historian Shimon Redlich succinctly puts it in his book on the town of Brzezany, survivors feel “simultaneously attracted and repelled” by their birthplaces.⁵²

The generally dramatic tone of early reports changes in narratives from later times, when the survivors are settled in new homes and return rather as tourists with their new families or groups of their *landslayt* (people from the same locality). Such returns can still be traumatic, marked by apprehension and unease. But some survivors find that these visits affirm their connection to their hometowns, and they resolve to visit again. Joshua Laks, a native of Zaklików in the Lublin region, visited his hometown in 1988 and 2001. He summed up his most recent trip with the following words:

49. Dov Zielonka, “The Finish” in *The Kalish Book*, ed. I.M. Lask (Tel Aviv: Societies of Former Residents of Kalish and the Vicinity in Israel and the USA, 1968), 291–92.

50. Mark Rakowski, “Di shtot fun mayne yunge yorn” in *Sefer kehilat Ostrolenka*, 430–31.

51. Dr. Chaim Shoshkes, “Vos ikh hob gezen in der alter yidishe shtot Reyshe,” in *Kehilat Raysha: Sefer zikaron*, ed. M. Yari-Wold (Tel Aviv: Former Residents of Rzeszow in Israel and the USA, 1967), 538.

52. Redlich, *Together and Apart*, 153.

The few locals with whom I interacted related to us better than had been my experience during my previous visit. The people were more open and willing to talk, something that had certainly not been the case under the communist regime. Zaklikow had undergone some development.... We encountered people who were willing to develop connections and even some who wished to be part of the commemoration. The memorial plaque now on display serves as evidence of this. The past cannot be recovered or restored, but we can preserve and ensure its remembrance—where there is some good will. Altogether, my second visit brought me great satisfaction—and I wouldn't swear that I won't be returning to Zaklikow again some time. The future awaits....⁵³

In her fascinating study *Poland's Threatening Other*, Joanna Michlic discusses the ongoing battle between two models of Polishness: “*ethnic nationalism*, exclusive of Jews and intolerant of multireligious and cultural diversity, and *civic nationalism*, inclusive of Jews and accepting of multireligious and cultural diversity.”⁵⁴ In the Polish-Jewish encounters described in the yizkor books we can see indirectly how this battle has played out at the level of everyday human relations throughout the postwar period.

The renowned Polish poet Julian Tuwim—who under the influence of the terrible news of the Holocaust returned partly to his Jewish roots—wrote his famous manifesto “We, Polish Jews,” in the United States in 1944. In a lofty manner similar to that of survivor-authors, but in a more optimistic tone, he wrote:

I believe in a future Poland in which [the Star of David painted on the Warsaw ghetto fighters' armbands] will become the highest order bestowed upon the bravest among Polish officers and soldiers. They will wear it proudly upon their breast next to the old *Virtuti Militari*.... And there shall be in Warsaw and in every other Polish city some fragment of the ghetto left standing and preserved in its present form in all its horror of ruin and destruction. We shall surround

53. Joshua Laks, *I Was There: Zaklikow, a Small Town to Remember* (Tel Aviv, 2005), 485–86.

54. Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 265. My italics.

that monument to the ignominy of our foes and to the glory of our tortured heroes with chains wrought from captured Hitler's guns, and every day we shall twine fresh live flowers into its iron links, so that the memory of the massacred people shall remain forever fresh in the minds of the generations to come, and also as a sign of our undying sorrow for them.⁵⁵

As we well know, Tuwim's dream was never realized, largely because of the political, social, and economic circumstances that I mentioned at the beginning of my lecture. Nevertheless, encouraged by some of the later survivors' reports as well as by changes that have occurred in Poland especially after 1989, one may hope for a Poland in which Jewish survivors or their descendants will feel more welcome in their hometowns and cities; we may hope, too, that they will find there signs of commemoration and at least some part of the prewar geographical, cultural, and human landscape that they or their ancestors depict with so much love and nostalgia in the yizkor books.

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55. Julian Tuwim, "We, Polish Jews" in *My, Żydzi polscy.../We, Polish Jews*, ed. Ch. Shmeruk (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 19.

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