

Piotr Forecki

# Reconstructing Memory

The Holocaust in Polish Public Debates

## GESCHICHTE ERINNERUNG POLITIK

Posener Studien zur Geschichts-,  
Kultur- und Politikwissenschaft

Herausgegeben von Anna Wolff-Powęska  
und Piotr Forecki



PETER LANG  
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Fakultät der politischen Wissenschaften  
und des Journalismus  
der Adam Mickiewicz Universität Posen

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# Introduction

One of key achievements of the Polish political transition was the unblocking of the hitherto limited public discourse. It began to include a variety of issues that had previously been disregarded, ignored, silenced or falsified. The topic of the Holocaust and the attitudes of its Polish witnesses was one of the problems about which communist Poland did not speak, at least not in an honest way. However, it was in the last decade of the communist system in Poland that the silence was broken by Catholic and oppositionist press, although the range of these debates was certainly limited.

After 1989, the problem of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II and, in general, Jewish history, culture and martyrdom, began to become a significant element of public discourse. These issues were no longer omitted by the Polish press; many important books appeared on the publishing market and Polish researchers, although few, gradually approached the subject and started to make amends for the lost decades. The topic of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations during World War II returned on the occasion of the commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Kielce pogrom and the debate over reprivatization.

During heated debates resulting from the conflicts about the former extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, Michał Cichy's article "Poles and Jews: Black Pages in the Annals of the Warsaw Uprising" published by "Gazeta Wyborcza", became one of the most important subjects of public consideration, as well as Jan Tomasz Gross' books: "Neighbours", "Fear" and "Golden Harvest." Also, the works of authors connected with Polish Centre for Holocaust Research: Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking<sup>1</sup> were widely discussed. The subject was also commented on after the publication of an article in "Der Spiegel" entitled: "The Dark Continent: Hitler's European Holocaust Helpers" in 2009 and the premiere of Władysław Pasikowski's film "Pokłosie" ["The Aftermath"] in 2012, which was inspired by the story of the murders of Jews committed by their Polish neighbours.

Doubtlessly, one could list more contexts and occasions when the topic of the Holocaust was raised. One thing is certain: every time it evoked intense emotions, it was as though it violated an intimate sphere of the nation and en-

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1 "Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu" and Barbara Engelking's "Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945"



tered the area of national taboos. These emotions demonstrate that the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations pose a problem for Poles, one that is serious, deeply rooted and of complex origin. This problem has been inherited from the communist period, when it had never been solved but only removed from sight or instrumentally used. The process of collective forgetting of the Holocaust contributed to serious distortions and gaps in the collective memory, which began to be fully recognised in the second half of the 1980s, during the first public debates.

This book attempts to reconstruct and analyse the disputes over the Polish-Jewish past and memory in public debates in Poland between 1985 and 2012, that is, from the discussion about Claude Lanzmann's "Shoah" to the controversies after the premiere of Władysław Pasikowski's "Pokłosie" ["The Aftermath"]. Not all the issues related to Polish-Jewish relations, i.e. the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, etc., became a topic of public debate even if they were an element of public discourse. Public discourse, defined as all public communication available, is a much more complex phenomenon and public debates constitute only an element of it.<sup>2</sup> Public debate includes public discussion and examining controversial issues and problems and its aim is to settle the dispute. Debate is a collective reflection on an issue that involves many participants who refer to each other's statements. Debates sometimes exist over extended periods of time; they have their own specific trajectories: beginnings, successive stages, turning points and more or less tangible ends. They are usually triggered by a conflict, an event, a publication, or a statement. A debate constitutes a structured entity and the participants are its architects.

The debates described in this book meet all of these criteria. The analysis includes their course, dynamics, main moot points and turning points, and – most importantly – the panorama of opinions revealed in the process. It embraced the debates held in the national press of diverse profiles and circulation. Some of them can certainly be considered a niche. The selection of press to be examined was not, however, limited by the frequency of publishing, level of circulation or a subjective opinion of their value. My intention was to reconstruct the widest possible spectrum of opinions that were revealed during the debate. Besides, opinions presented by periodicals that are considered as marginal and insignificant often corresponded with opinions that were formulated in leading papers by main public actors.

The debates were participated in by broad symbolic elites: journalists, clergy, academics, intellectuals and politicians; in other words, people who exer-

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2 M. Czyżewski, S. Kowalski, A. Piotrowski, *Rytualny chaos. Studium dyskursu publicznego*, Kraków 1997, s. 11-15.

cised control over publically accessible knowledge, legitimacy of beliefs and the content of public discourse.<sup>3</sup> Their essays, polemic articles, columns, interviews, public statements, appeals and sermons co-created the debates that are analysed in this book. The analyses include both their explicit and implicit content.

This book consists of four chapters and an epilogue and the first chapter is a prelude that is necessary for reading the others. It would be hard to explain and understand the emotions that accompanied the debates held in Poland after 1985 without recognising what happened to the Polish memory of the Holocaust between 1945 and the end of 1990s. During this period, the Holocaust, everything related to it and anything that caused anxiety was being repressed from collective, national memory. However diverse the reasons for the Polish desire to forget about the extermination of Jews, the fact remains that Polish collective memory was seriously distorted. Hence, ignoring the phenomenon of collective forgetting of the Holocaust in communist Poland would be a serious mistake, as it determined all the following disputes concerning the Polish-Jewish past and memory. What proves that collective forgetting indeed occurred were the irrational responses to information about Polish attitudes to Jews and the Holocaust that had been suppressed, distorted or hidden as they could cast a shadow on Polish nation. As Jerzy Jedlicki aptly noted, no other historical subject in Poland strikes “a hidden chord of moral sensitivity or resentment” so intensely and so often.<sup>4</sup>

The next chapters directly correspond with the title of the book. Chapter II is devoted to the processes of reconstructing the Polish memory of Jews and the Holocaust in the last decade of the People’s Republic of Poland. It is based on the analysis of the first public debates inspired by Claude Lanzmann’s film “Shoah” and the publication of Jan Błoński’s essay “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto” in the “Tygodnik Powszechny” weekly. On the one hand, the debates broke the prevailing conspiracy of silence. On the other, they manifested problems that Poles had to face after 1989 and will probably still have to confront. Considering their limited scope, these debates are difficult to compare with those held in the following years. However, their importance was crucial.

Chapter III reconstructs the most important, the most in-depth and the longest debate of all discussions about Polish attitudes to the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish pre-war relations that has ever been held; namely, the debate over Jan Tomasz Gross’s book titled: “Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne”. The author described the murders of Jews that were

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3 Zob. M. Czyżewski, S. Kowalski, A. Piotrowski, op. cit., s. 17.

4 J. Jedlicki, *Jak się z tym uporać. Polacy wobec zagłady Żydów*, “Polityka” 10 II 2001, s. 68.

committed by their neighbours: Polish residents of Jedwabne. The book's uniqueness resulted mainly from the specificity and significance of the problem that Poles had to confront. While Claude Lanzmann and his "Shoah" illustrated the problem of being a witness of the Holocaust and the question of Polish-Jewish past, and Jan Błoński in his essay drew public attention to the Polish sin of indifference towards the Holocaust, Jan Tomasz Gross confronted Poles with the problem of direct complicity in the extermination of Jews. He did it long before Michał Cichy, whose article is also discussed in the chapter. The last chapter of the book includes an analysis of a debate initiated by another book by Jan Tomasz Gross: "Fear". The epilogue examines the debate over "Golden Harvest" by Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross and other recent publications, as well an analysis of the responses to "Pokłosie" ("The Aftermath") by Władysław Pasikowski. It is also a summary of the book.

Considering its subject, this book would undoubtedly be more complete if it also included analyses of other debates around the difficult Polish-Jewish past that have been held so far. These include, for example, the controversy over whether the National Armed Forces had participated in the murder of Jews, the controversies over returning Jewish properties and debates held at anniversaries of the Kielce pogrom and the events of March 1968. However interesting and worthy of consideration they may be, the scope and social significance of these debates were limited.

This book is based on a publication titled "Od Shoah do Strachu. Spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych"<sup>5</sup> [From Shoah to Fear: Disputes about the past and the memory of Polish-Jewish relations]. The present version, however, has been significantly shortened; expanded footnotes have been reduced and the composition has been modified. For example, one chapter has been removed; it was devoted to the controversies about symbolic control over the former extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, over the location of Carmelite Convent, over religious symbols at Birkenau Death Camp, and over the act of placing the souvenir cross from the Mass said by the Pope at Auschwitz II in 1979, placed in the Auschwitz gravel pit. All these disputes have demonstrated that Auschwitz-Birkenau symbolised something different for Polish and Jewish memory communities, although for both it was a significant site where they confirmed their identity. Instrumental use of Auschwitz-Birkenau by communist propagandists, who made it a symbol of anti-Fascism and a site of martyrdom of many nations, but particularly Poles, have significantly influenced Polish collective memory. Although 90 percent of the Ausch-

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5 P. Forecki, *Od "Shoah" do "Strachu". Spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych*, Poznań 2010.

witz victims were Jewish, Poles have rarely perceived this place as a symbol of Holocaust, simple because the truth about the camp had been falsified. However, social awareness has been recently changing for the better. All these questions have been excluded from the book only because they had already been fully described by other scholars.<sup>6</sup> However, analyses of events that took place after the Polish edition, which are discussed mainly in the epilogue, have been added to the book.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the many people who have made this book possible. First of all, I am very grateful to Anna Kulec, who was the first proof reader, and Marta Skowrońska, who translated the book into English. Very special thanks go to Michael Steinlauf, Michał Głowiński, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Krystyna Kersten, Jerzy Jedlicki and Mark Ziółkowski. Their books and articles were a source of inspiration so great that to mention them solely in footnotes would be an injustice. Certainly, the blame for all the mistakes and shortcomings lies only with the author, just as the responsibility for all the judgments and opinions included in the book are his.

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6 Zob. G. Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz. Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*, The University of Chicago Press 2006.



# Chapter I

## Collective forgetting of the Holocaust in the People's Republic of Poland

### 1. Collective memory and collective forgetting

Collective memory has been explored by different social sciences and defined in many ways. Moreover, there are also other names to describe and analyse this phenomenon, such as: “social memory”, “historical memory”, “historical consciousness” or “cultural memory”. Since collective memory is studied by researchers representing various fields of science (even if they sometimes touch upon the same issues and problems), different meanings are attached to it. Therefore, the literature about collective memory is characterised by “conceptual and terminological confusion”.<sup>7</sup> From the perspective of this book, two definitions, which are general and mutually corresponding, seem sufficient. The first was offered by Barbara Szacka, according to whom, collective memory refers to “a set of beliefs” of a given community “about its past, about people and events that inhabited it” and a way of “commemorating the past and spread the knowledge about it” – this knowledge is considered as “obligatory equipment of each member of this community.”<sup>8</sup> The other definition was coined by Marek Ziółkowski, who stated that collective memory is “a set (or arrangement) of beliefs about the past; beliefs that belong to social consciousness, in which one's own individual memories mix with messages received from other people. To a smaller or larger extent, this set of beliefs meets the three main criteria of social consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, collective memory is a projection of the past shared by a community that is aware of its own continuance; it is based on a set of beliefs and ideas that refer to the past. These beliefs and ideas usually concern past events, but also persons who are engraved in the memory of a community and are commemorated by it. They do not need to correlate with facts and the historical truth. As

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7 B. Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Warszawa 2006, p. 33.

8 B. Szacka, *Historia i pamięć zbiorowa*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2003, no 4, p. 4.

9 M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting after Communism. The Polish Case*. “Polish Sociological Review”, 2002, no1, pp. 7-24

Bronisław Baczko noted, images of past events and persons are valued by collective memory more than historical knowledge reproduced and provided by historians.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, historical findings and common beliefs do not have to overlap; collective memory can actually refer to a national imagination consisting of myths and legends. It is only important that the images shared by a community refer to the past of that community and co-create a complex system of signs and symbols that is comprehensible only for the community members.

One should also take into consideration that “collective memory” serves as a metaphor which represents common content rooted in the minds of many people at the same time. However, it is always an individual who remembers, not a community. A member of a social group is also a depository of the collective memory that is cultivated and transferred within this group. Therefore, collective memory consists of beliefs about the past events to which an individual refers as a member of a given social group.<sup>11</sup>

For some social groups, collective memory is a defining element. For instance, nations, religious groups, and ethnic and local communities cannot do without it if they want to maintain and strengthen their identity.<sup>12</sup> A nation is a remarkable example of a community that is difficult to imagine without referring to a collective memory of the past.<sup>13</sup> Not only is collective memory a necessary ingredient of individual identity, but also the collective identity of each nation. As Paul Ricoeur notes, it “assures the temporal continuity of the person” and, by this he means that it assures the identity of this person.<sup>14</sup> A response to the question “Who am I?”/“Who are we?” should be preceded with an answer to another question: “Who was I?”/who were we?” Without memory, individuals and nations would be automatically deprived of their identity; moreover, their present would become difficult to comprehend and interpret. A nation needs to be aware that its present derives from the past and that the past consequently drives a nation into the future. Thus, it is necessary to maintain continuity with

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10 See: B. Baczko, *Wyobrażenia społeczne. Szkice o nadziei i pamięci zbiorowej*, Warszawa 1994, p. 14 -15, 40.

11 See: A. Szpociński, *Kanon historyczny. Pamięć zbiorowa a pamięć indywidualna*, “Studia Socjologiczne” 1983, no 4, p. 129-131.

12 Ibidem, p. 130.

13 See: G. Pyszczek, *Pamięć narodowa jako problem filozoficzny*, “Przegląd Filozoficzny” 2004, no 1, p. 241-255; B. Szacka, *Pamięć społeczna a identyfikacja narodowa*, [in:] *Trudne sąsiedztwa. Z socjologii konfliktów narodowościowych*, A. Jasińska-Kania (Ed.), Warszawa 2001, p. 37-45; J. Kiliński, *Wspólnota abstrakcyjna. Zarys socjologii narodu*, Warszawa 2004; B. Anderson, *Wspólnoty wyobrażone*, Kraków 1997.

14 P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 96

the past to develop national identity. The further the collective memory goes back into the past, the stronger the national identity is rooted.<sup>15</sup>

Needless to say, each nation refers to their past or searches for their roots with their own varying intensity, as Barbara Szacka noted.<sup>16</sup> For Poles, memory of the past is very significant. They are classified by researchers as a nation which is “historically sensitive about the past and interested in it”.<sup>17</sup>

The process of the development of collective memory cannot be reduced to a simple aggregation of individual memories. There are many factors involved in this process. The remembered past is an area of a permanent conflict between different images of the past inscribed in the memory of individuals and social groups. Thus, the development of collective memory can be viewed as a game that is permanently played between different subjects representing different memories. For this reason, Bourdieu’s concept of a field seems to be a very useful theoretical tool to study this phenomenon. Anna Sawisz used Bourdieu’s theory to analyse the social memory of the past.<sup>18</sup> According to this theory, social memory of the past is a field, in which the “stake of the game” is collective identity.<sup>19</sup>

This game is played by historians, people who popularise history, various social groups, interest groups, political parties, the Catholic Church and other institutionalised and informal participants in public life.<sup>20</sup> Particular attention should be paid to the state authority, represented mainly by the educational system and its communication tools. In the field of social memory, there are also individuals whose memory stems from their own experience and the stories about the past that they were told by their relatives. Family knowledge of the past, however, is limited to three generations.<sup>21</sup>

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15 See: M. Król, *Miedzy przeszłością a przyszłością. O pamięci, zapominaniu i przewidywaniu*, Poznań 2004.

16 See: B. Szacka, *Dzieci – Szkoła – Społeczna pamięć przeszłości*, “Kultura i społeczeństwo” 1998, no 4, p.165.

17 E. Tarkowska, *Polacy wobec przyszłości i przeszłości. Czas społeczny w okresie realnego socjalizmu i w okresie transformacji*, [in:] *Idee a urządzenie świata społecznego. Księga jubileuszowa dla Jerzego Szackiego*, E. Nowicka, M. Chałubiński (Eds.), Warszawa 1999, p. 403.

18 See: P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 226-257; P. Bourdieu, L. J. D. Vacquant, *Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 94-115.

19 See: A. Sawisz, *Transmisja pamięci przeszłości*, [in:] *Czas przeszły i pamięć społeczna*, A. Sawisz, B. Szacka, Warszawa 1990, p. 121-137; These considerations are based on the research concept proposed by Anna Sawisz.

20 M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting after Communism...*, p.7

21 See: N. Jakowenko, *O pamięci i tradycji historycznej*, “Przegląd Polityczny” 2003, no 59, p. 96.



Certainly, the list of agents who subscribe to the game of memory is incomplete, and the social position of the agents is never identical. However, such a list can be analysed in relation to the political regime of a country and the degree of permission given to the coexistence of competitive memories of the past. Totalitarian, authoritarian and liberal-democratic systems will each have a different impact on it.

The essence of the first two systems is the elimination of any memory that differs from the official version and thus prevents other “agents of memory” from speaking. Totalitarian regimes strictly regulate and standardise the field of social memory. Although the function of every political power is to rule over the past, only totalitarian power exercises absolute control over it and makes it a key government tool in addition to deciding what to remember and how and what should be unquestionably forgotten. According to Hannah Arendt, making people, things or subjects disappear from public memory, creating “holes of oblivion”, is an immanent feature of totalitarianism.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as Milan Kundera aptly noted with the words of a character from one of his books: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”<sup>23</sup>.

There are also struggles over memory in liberal democracies, although they are less intensive. They may become exacerbated whenever the state authority aspires to appropriate the past and dictate a binding interpretation of past events and when the social past and the official past no longer correspond with each other.

Official memory includes the public and formal interpretations of the past that are controlled by the state authority. The authorities use various methods to spread this version and, at the same time, to control it. Official memory manifests itself in national celebrations, iconography, publications, and memorials and it is transferred through the media and the educational system. Official memory always occupies a privileged position in the field of social memory and in public discourse, regardless of the character of the political regime. This is because every power has a stake in controlling what is remembered and how it is commemorated. As Michael Foucault noted, “if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism”.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, common memory consists of social beliefs and images about the past, which are shared regardless of whether they were granted official per-

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22 See: H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*,

23 M. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, p. 4

24 M. Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, Semiotexte(e), New York 1996, p. 124.

mission.<sup>25</sup> It is an amalgam of individual memories, messages conveyed by family and social environment, a result of education and the acknowledged and internalised version of history. Official and common memory can sometimes overlap and complement each other but also can be mutually exclusive. Differences between common and official memory represent the distance between the authorities and the general populace.

In liberal democracy, the field of social memory includes various memories represented by individuals, informal groups and institutions. They coexist and become articulated within the social sphere. These memories do not always correspond and the differences between them can sometimes result in serious tensions and social conflicts. The opportunity to manifest them freely, however, undermines and disintegrates the status of each memory that aspires to appropriate the interpretation of the past. Therefore, a system of mutual control emerges and the image of the past becomes complemented with recollections embedded in individual memories.<sup>26</sup>

The coexistence of various private memories in the public sphere in a pluralistic social system is related to a phenomenon labelled by Pierre Nora as the “democratisation of history”. The memory of the past is no longer possessed by historians, or other people, or institutions formally responsible for its storage, reconstruction and interpretation. It becomes the property of liberated and emancipated nations, of national, ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, and individuals. Various equal memories, hitherto confiscated and/or absent from public life, now make their voice heard. For the aforementioned minorities, regaining their own past creates conditions for full affirmation or redefinition of their identity.<sup>27</sup>

The development of a national, collective past in a pluralistic system is thus a specific negotiation process between various actors equipped with their own image of the remembered past. According to Barbara Szacka, their main channel of communication and the field in which they coexist and struggle is the “disseminated memory”.<sup>28</sup> It is co-created by diverse journalistic, fictional, popular

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25 See: E. Dmtrów, *Pamięć i zapomnienie w stosunkach polsko-niemieckich*, “Przegląd Zachodni” 2000, no 1, p. 2.

26 See: M. Beylin, *Spory pamięci. Analiza debaty prasowej* [in:] *Rytualny chaos. Studium dyskursu publicznego*, M. Czyżewski, S. Kowalski, A. Piotrowski (Eds.), Kraków 1997, p. 227-229.

27 See: P. Nora, *Czas pamięci*, “Res Publica Nowa” 2001, no 7, p. 40-41.

28 See: B. Szacka, *Transformacja społeczna a świadomość historyczna*, typescript, 1996, p. 3, citation after: A. Paczkowski, *Od sfalszowanego zwycięstwa do prawdziwej klęski*, Kraków 1999, p. 208-209; Geoffrey Hartman proposed another term, which is “public memory”, embracing the multitude of messages about the past, publicised by the state

science or course book texts about the past. Interpretations of the past are also given via TV and radio educational programmes, documentaries and movies, street names, symbolic policy, anniversaries, commemorations and national holidays<sup>29</sup> and are developed by journalists, historians, teachers, and other public actors. Although the “disseminated memory” still occupies a privileged position, it always runs into common memory based on individual knowledge and experience. Researchers who analyse collective memory identify two main forms of the relationship between common and disseminated memory.

According to Barbara Szacka, “disseminated memory” reaches the general populace and is submitted to the processes of selection and falsification or confirmation. It is confronted with the current resource of factual knowledge, beliefs and evaluative judgments about the past. Both knowledge and judgment result from personal experience and from family and generational transmission. Only when filtered through these media is “disseminated memory” able to penetrate “common memory”, which is never a simple reflection and accumulation of messages from the “educational and persuasive area”.<sup>30</sup>

According to Jerzy Jedlicki, however, disseminated memory consists of numerous and often mutually contradictory stories of the past. These stories serve as templates for “thousands of individual biographies, deprived of what is irregular, unusual, inconsistent or ambiguous”.<sup>31</sup> In other words, individual memories are honed so they can be assimilated into the collectively negotiated and created memory of the past. Collective memory thus seems to be a metaphorical name for the accepted image of the past of the “disseminated memory”. This is the image in which individual memories find their roots and from which they learn about the past that is already unavailable for them. As Waldemar Kuligowski notes, selectivity of human memory is sometimes supplemented with the content of the “objectifying collective discourse”.<sup>32</sup>

The theories presented above seem to complement rather than exclude each other as they both refer to two elementary human needs: confirmation of identity and belonging to a community. People need to define themselves as individuals with unique biographies but also as members of some community. As a result, their own past memories are supplemented, confirmed and strengthened in the

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and the media. According to Hartman, public memory is jittery, mobile and perpetually changing; See: G. H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Indiana University Press 1996, p. 107.

29 B. Szacka, *Transformacja...*, p. 208-209.

30 B. Szacka, *Transformacja...*, p. 209.

31 See: J. Jedlicki, *O pamięci zbiorowej*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 26-27 VII 1997, p. 14.

32 W. Kuligowski, *O historii, literaturze i teraźniejszości oraz innych formach zapominania*, “Konteksty” 2003, no 3-4, p. 83.

memories of people who surround them. If the need to belong is stronger than the desire for individuality and uniqueness or if our own memories fail – David Lowenthal notes – “we adjust personal elements to the collectively remembered past and we gradually stop recognizing which is which”.<sup>33</sup>

It is worth noticing that collective memory is always influenced by the present. It is the present that decides what should be remembered at a given moment and how it should be remembered, but also which past events or people should be forgotten: it defines their position in the collective memory and determines historical interpretations. Researchers who study the determinants of attitudes to the past agree that the present is the determining factor, while our reception and perception of the past are always subjected to current problems,<sup>34</sup> as well as our interest in the past, its recollections and actualisations.

It is also usually true that traumatised nations and societies have a particular tendency to look towards the past to find comfort or confirmation of their identity.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, collective memory, like individual memory, is adjustable and can be adapted to what is currently believed to be just and glorious, and what is to be condemned. It evolves with the changing criteria of social judgements, to which it adjusts the stored images of the past.

Without doubt, however, there are specific events and people from the past that will always generate memories, although there is no certainty when and how they will be remembered and interpreted, what meaning they will convey, who will claim them and which goals they will serve. One should thus agree with Jan Assman, according to whom “cultural memory has its fixed point, its horizon does not change with the passing of time (...) we call these [points] ‘figures of memory’ (...) it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation (...) sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation.”<sup>36</sup> Memory is flexible and the present influences “figures of memory”. This is proved by debates about past events held in different parts of the world and concern changes in current “figures of memory.”<sup>37</sup> Redefined, they are no longer valid or lose their exclusive access code to the past.

It would be a truism to say that no complete set of past events and persons are stored in the collective memory of a nation and not everything that took place a long time ago is automatically classified as a “historical can-

33 D. Lowenthal, *Przeszłość to obcy kraj*, “Res Publica Nowa”, 2001, no 7, p. 9-10.

34 See: M. Ziółkowski, *Cztery funkcje...*, p. 56.

35 See: E. Tarkowska, op. cit., 403.

36 See: J. Assmann and John Czaplicka, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, New German Critique, No. 65, 1995, p129-130.

37 Ibidem, p. 11-16.

on”.<sup>38</sup> These events and characters go through the evaluation process and only a select few play a significant role in the collective memory of a nation, as a reference point for current actions. Therefore, collective memory has little in common with the notion of tradition in the subjective sense, as proposed by Jerzy Szacki, which covers only the part of heritage that the consecutive generations agree to maintain and keep alive.<sup>39</sup> What matters is not the objective legacy but the way the elements from the past are evaluated. From this perspective, tradition is incorporated into the present and “represents a particular type of value which needs to be referred to the past to be defended (or criticised)” and these values must be shared and accepted by a community.<sup>40</sup>

Referring to Marek Ziółkowski, one could say that collective forgetting is a reversal of the phenomenon of collective memory. Collective forgetting means that even if certain beliefs concerning the past cross someone's mind, they are transformed, reduced, reinterpreted and pushed to the subconscious; they cease to be the subject of public discussion, and do not give rise to any group or individual activities of a practical nature.<sup>41</sup>

Needless to say, aspects of our past that are submitted to the process of forgetting are diverse and such is the influence of forgetting on our identity. From the perspective of this book, however, one particular variant of forgetting is significant. First of all, it concerns the community; second of all, it refers to past events that fall into oblivion for a particular reason<sup>42</sup>: usually those that bring shame and discomfort to the community, and/or do not match the acknowledged and cultivated model of collective identity. As with individual forgetting, collective oblivion also applies to the rule expressed by Maurice Halbwachs that one remembers what is comfortable to remember and forgets what is comfortable to forget.<sup>43</sup>

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38 See: A. Szpociński, *Kanon historyczny. Pamięć zbiorowa a pamięć indywidualna*, “Studia Socjologiczne” 1983, no 4, p. 134-136.

39 J. Szacki, *Tradycja. Przegląd problematyki*, Warszawa 1971, p. 150.

40 Ibidem, p.155.

41 See: M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting after Communism. The Polish Case*. Polish Sociological Review, 2002, no1, pp. 7-24

42 As Maria Hirszwicz and Elżbieta Neyman note, “similar to ignorance, which we relativise to knowledge, oblivion may be described only as socially important gaps in collective memory. Thus, if we define memory as accumulation and recording information and its interpretation structures rooted in the mind, oblivion is everything beyond this zone – both unabsorbed information and the information which was eliminated or forgotten”. See: M. Hirszwicz, E. Neyman, *Spoleczne ramy niepamięci*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2001, no 3-4, p. 24.

43 M. Halbwachs, *Spoleczne ramy pamięci*, Warszawa 1969, p. 368.

In this context, collective forgetting does not result from the natural limitations of human memory, which is sometimes fragmentary, selective and burdened with information coming from everywhere. This approach is not intended to be a positive answer to Friedrich Nietzsche's appeal that warned against "the excess of history" which "has attacked life's plastic powers" and propagated the necessity or even apotheosis of oblivion and "enclosing oneself within a bounded *horizon*."<sup>44</sup> Also, oblivion is not perceived the way Jürgen Habermas defined it, who stated that exact memory of events crucial for the collective past is related to the means of actively forgetting the past and letting it go.<sup>45</sup>

Collective forgetting refers to something completely different. It exposes the more or less conscious disposition of community members to omit some aspects of the past and leave them beyond the margins of collective memory. They are aspects that bring shame and mental discomfort and sometimes burden the community with responsibility and sometimes, in addition to the symbolic apology, require practical action such as reparations or restitution. They do not match the cultivated narratives about their bravery, glory and suffering, but constitute a completely new story. If this story were acknowledged, it would present a diverse and complex image of the past. It would also require necessary corrections to the collective memory, which would enrich it and introduce balance between glory and disgrace. As a result, a complete reconstruction of collective identity would be possible.

Needless to say, collective forgetting manifests itself in diverse forms and on different levels. According to Paul Ricoeur, it may be as passive as it is active. It is "a strategy of avoidance, of evasion, of flight", "motivated by a will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen's environment, in short by a wanting-not-to-know". These two levels of collective forgetting can overlap and complement each other but can also be mutually exclusive. Spontaneous, social processes of forgetting sometimes cover the state policy of forgetting about some elements of the uncomfortable past. In this case, institutionalised oblivion, or, as Shari J. Cohen labelled it, "state-organized forgetting of history"<sup>46</sup>, corresponds with spontaneous forgetting and even overlaps it. This often happens in the name of an unspoken national agreement not to deal with difficult subjects and antagonise society. Forgetting helps to legitimise power, to keep a collective good mood and, in particular, to defend the collective identity that

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44 See: F. Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 120

45 See: J. Habermas, *O publicznym użytkowaniu historii*, [in:] *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, M. Łukasiewicz (Ed.), Londyn 1990, p. 67.

46 Citation after: M. Shafir, *Between Denial and "Comparative Trivialization"*, "Acta. Analysis of Current Trends in Anti-Semitism", 2002, no. 19, p. 4.

could be disturbed by certain past events. “An all-national community of forgetting and selective remembering, which serves collective, all-national interests” agrees on one thing: not to talk about the difficult past and not to recall it.<sup>47</sup>

Sometimes, however, forgetting is only an order of the authorities, reflected in silence, lies and repressive censorship, which are characteristics of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Such an institutionalised order does not correspond with the common memory of the past, but mutilates, suppresses and represses it.

As has been already mentioned, management of the past is conducted by every authority, including democratic ones. Institutionalised memory and forgetting, as David Middletown and Derek Edwards noted, is demonstrating that collective memory is essential for the identity and cohesion of a community. “It is not just that ‘he who controls the past, controls the future’ but also ‘he who controls the past controls who we are’.”<sup>48</sup> The difference is that liberal democracies involve numerous participants in the game of social memory and the position of the state authority, however privileged it may be, is not omnipotent. “Official memory” also occupies a privileged position, for instance in the case of historical policy.

Collective forgetting of some elements of the past is sometimes increased by various means and methods. Past events are sometimes simply passed over in silence, sometimes reinterpreted or falsified; biographies of heroes are presented selectively and the blame for reprehensible acts or omissions is attached to enemies or circumstances. All these actions are intended to unburden memory, ease conscience and safely forget. The process of collective forgetting has a lot in common with the regression of uncomfortable information from individual consciousness. However, these endeavours do not end in complete success. Traumatic events, repressed and stored in the unconscious, cause neuroses and block the processes of remembering and mourning. “Silencing” the dark side of a past not yet dealt with, as Gesine Schwann notes, not only poisons individual minds, but also paralyses social life and hinders the development of democratic attitudes.<sup>49</sup>

Marek Ziółkowski labelled difficult and problematic aspects of the Polish past related to historical taboos as “skeletons in the nation's history closet”. This metaphor stands for events and elements of the past that are submitted to “more or less deliberate and functional selective remembering and forgetting”.<sup>50</sup> There

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47 See: M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting ...*, p. 14.

48 D. Edwards, D. Middletown, *Collective Remembering*, Routledge, London 1990, p. 10.

49 Citation after A. Krzemiński, *Okaleczeni milczeniem*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 28 VII 2001, p. 18.

50 M. Ziółkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting ...*, p. 9.

are “two distinct layers of memory and oblivion, and, consequently, two main types of ‘skeletons’. One is linked with the pre-communist past (up to 1945), while the other is connected with the communist past (1945-1989)”. The difference between them is significant.

The former are “mostly ‘all-national’” and “kept in the closet” in the name of the national interest “because they can be detrimental to the perception and self-perception of the national group as a whole”, while the latter “are hidden in the closet not by the national group as a whole, but rather by some particular groups or individuals”.<sup>51</sup> However, the processes of the collective forgetting of the elements of the national past from before 1945 were intensified in the communist period. In other words, “skeletons” from the pre-communist period were then banished.

There are several issues related to the past that were falsified, reinterpreted and repressed after 1945, both by official and common memory. First of all, collective forgetting was evident with regard to the culture, tradition and achievements of ethnic groups that had lived on Polish territory before the war. Secondly, “Poles concentrated on their own fate tended and still tend to disregard or belittle pains, tragedies and losses of other ethnic groups”. Thirdly, it was also forgotten that “although Poles were mainly victims they sometimes also victimised others”. Fourthly, “Poles tend to forget or minimise the fact that they on many occasions also unjustly benefited from all those historical processes, that they were beneficiaries of some acts of injustice.”<sup>52</sup>

All these aspects of the past constitute the realm of historical taboo. This specific social phenomenon is particularly true in the case of the Holocaust, which was organised and led by Nazi Germany. The subject of the Holocaust may be even considered as a paradigmatic manifestation of the process of collective forgetting in Poland, during which official memory corresponded with a spontaneous need to forget among the masses. Between 1945 and 1989 the aforementioned “all-national community of forgetting and selective remembering” developed. It was only at the beginning of the 1980s, when the first signals of breaking the national conspiracy of silence appeared, that the national conspiracy of silence would break. Before presenting a fragmentary analysis of the collective forgetting of the Holocaust, however, it is important to provide the context.

Under the policy of Nazi Germany, Poland became the main arena for the extermination of Polish Jews and other Jews deported from Nazi-occupied Europe. It was in the Polish territory where Nazis built concentration camps, in

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51 See: M. Ziolkowski, *Remembering and Forgetting...*, . 14-15.

52 Ibidem, p. 12-14.



which exclusively or primarily Jews died. Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Chelmno-on-Ner, Sobibor, Belzec, Majdanek, Gross-Rosen, Stuthoff: these were the “factories of death” installed in Poland by the Nazis.<sup>53</sup> It was also there that the last stage of the murderous plan of the “Final Solution” was carried out. However, the process of the extermination of the Jews who had lived on Polish territory before the World War II was not limited to these camps, where the only participants and witnesses were the murderers, victims and people who lived in close proximity. The Holocaust was stretched in time, consisted of particular stages, was committed with different methods and, most importantly, in numerous places in Poland and before the eyes of Polish citizens. It was the omnipresence of the Holocaust that placed the war fate of Polish Jews in the very “centre of the occupational experience of Polish citizens in every town and village.”<sup>54</sup>

Even if “every town” was some generalisation, it is definitely true that the Holocaust occurred before Poles’ eyes in different places in Poland and that Poles observed its each particular stage. They knew Nazi orders about the Jews, they met people marked by the stigmatising “Star of David”, they saw Jews deported, they observed the walls of the ghettos and how these ghettos were then liquidated. They saw Jews gathering in central points of cities, villages and towns, in squares and markets, sometimes right before execution in nearby forests or deportation to an extermination camp.

Some of them saw Jews killed one by one, executed collectively, or transported in cattle cars. There were those who saw smoke rising from crematoria and learnt what the smell of burnt flesh was. And the rest could at least hear about it. Finally, at the end of the war, Poles must have noted that shtetl residents vanished into thin air; that none of their former Jewish neighbours were around and that the number of Polish Jews had declined. In 1939, the number of Jews in Poland was nearly 3.5 million people, and between 1939 and 1945 nearly 3 million were murdered.<sup>55</sup> About 50-60,000 Jews are estimated to have survived the war in Poland: on the Aryan side, in forest hideouts, or in partisan camps.<sup>56</sup>

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53 These places were acknowledged as extermination camps the Act of 7 May 1999 *on the protection of former Nazi extermination camps* Journal of Laws of 1999, No. 41, item 412 as amended)

54 J. T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada. Trze eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i komunistów 1939-1948*, Kraków 2001, p. 58-59.

55 See: F. Tych (Ed.), *Pamięć. Historia Żydów Polskich przed, w czasie, i po Zagładzie*, Warszawa 2004, p. 66-67, 157.

56 This number does not include repatriates from the Soviet Union. Ibidem, p. 175-180; See: B. Szaynok, *Ocaleni z Holokaustu w Polsce 1944-1950*, [in:] *Holokaust. Lekcja*

However, a combination of various circumstances and psychological mechanisms made the unprecedented event of the Holocaust and the memory of the murdered Jews and Jews in general be submitted to the process of collective forgetting. Jews were not mourned in Poland; it would be hard to find any evidence of collective grief. Contrarily, there are testimonies that demonstrate that Jews returning home were welcomed with astonishment and confusion rather than sympathy. Poles wanted to forget about the Holocaust and its victims for many reasons and that is what happened. Referring to Eva Hoffman, who stated that “In the memory of the Holocaust, Poland occupies a special place”, one may say that in Poland, memories of the Holocaust have not occupied any special place for decades, although since 1980s, the situation has been improving.<sup>57</sup>

Without doubt, the thesis about collective forgetting about the Holocaust requires evidence and explanation. It demands an answer to the question: what exactly was forgotten and how? What were the main reasons for the need to collectively forget? What were the circumstances and manifestations of this process? Before answering these questions, however, it is necessary to provide some important comments and reservations that explain the structure of the following considerations.

Some researchers claim that forgetting the Holocaust and, in general, exploitation of the problem of Polish-Jewish relations, both of which resulted in serious modifications to the Polish collective memory, are primarily the effect of the policy of the communist Polish state. The historical policy during communism was based on concealment and manipulation of history and memory, and on censorship preventing public debate and limiting the freedom of research and publications. In other words, forgetting the Holocaust was a result of what had been inscribed into the framework of the official memory of the past and what had been eliminated from it through silence and transformation. What is more, the restricting censorship simply blocked any debate attempts. Therefore, from this perspective, the authorities and the system are to blame.

Denying these words would be a serious mistake. The state policy of the People's Republic of Poland (Polish: *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, PRL) concerning the Holocaust and Jews in general largely contributed to the process of collective forgetting. Forgetting the Holocaust was thus a state-organised element of the official historical policy on the war memory. To claim, however, that the process of forgetting resulted only from the state policy and the nature

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*historii. Zagłada Żydów w edukacji szkolnej*, J. Chrobaczyński, P. Trojański (Eds.), Kraków 2004, p. 47-62.

57 See: E. Hoffman, *Sztetl*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 6 II 1998, p. 10.

of the system, would be a simplification and a limitation of the cognitive perspective. Official memory of the Holocaust in Poland responded to the need of the common memory to repress the difficult past. In other words, state and society met the halfway and the “active forgetting” defined by Paul Ricoeur corresponded with the processes of “passive forgetting”.<sup>58</sup>

The historian Paweł Macewicz drew attention to this phenomenon, stating that PRL constituted two types of taboo on the Holocaust: political and social. The former was reinforced by communist authorities, who, aware of their weak social support, avoided the sensitive subject of the Holocaust and Jews. Therefore, the question of Jewish martyrdom and, in particular, the problematic topic of the Polish attitude towards the Holocaust and pre-war Polish-Jewish relations were not exposed. If these subjects appeared at all, they only did to some limited extent and were treated in an instrumental way.

The social taboo, labelled as a national taboo by Włodzimierz Borodziej, concerned particular aspects of the Holocaust that the authorities were determined to conceal. They included the complicated Polish-Jewish past before the war and, in particular, Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust which were “considered shameful, ambiguous and confusing – even subconsciously.”<sup>59</sup> That is how a certain informal, national “community of selective remembering and forgetting” spontaneously emerged. This community, as Lech Nijakowski noted, protected the taboo on the Holocaust “by police batons on the one hand and social anathema on the other.”<sup>60</sup>

As we see, the PRL authorities created conditions for forgetting the Holocaust. The official memory of the war reinforced the common processes of forgetting through silence, falsifications, half-truths and modifications of history. To prove this social phenomenon and demonstrate that the state-organised forgetting about the Holocaust corresponded with the social need for oblivion, it is important to determine the reasons for this need and only then present the process of forgetting.

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58 See: P. Ricoeur, *Pamięć, zapomnienie, historia*, [in:] *Tożsamość w czasach zmiany*, K. Michalski (Ed.), Kraków 1995, p. 38-39.

59 See: *Pamięć jako pole bitwy*, (editorial discussion of Paweł Machcewicz, Feliks Tych, Włodzimierz Borodziej, Grzegorz Motyka) “Przegląd Polityczny” 2001, no 52/53, p. 11-12.

60 See: Lech M. Nijakowski, *Baron Munchhausen czyli o polskiej polityce pamięci*, “Przegląd Polityczny” 2006, no 75, p. 56.

## 2. Genealogy of the need to forget

In his memories, Kazimierz Brandys noted that “after seven hundred years of sharing the common ground, Poles did not shed a tear at the Jews turned into ashes.”<sup>61</sup> Why was it so? Why did the “common disease of silence” about the Jews and the Holocaust spread across Poland for entire decades?<sup>62</sup> Why did people want to forget?

One of the often-recognised reasons for this amnesia and for indifferent attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust during the war was the cultural, life-style and religious differences between Poles and Jews before the war. The distance between the two nations resulted in their separation and mutual lack of understanding in defining the gap between the two communities. The circumstances and reasons for this distance are not crucial and there is no point in searching for those who were responsible for it. It is important, however, to note the fact that before the war, Poles and Jews lived next to each other rather than together.<sup>63</sup>

The pre-war anti-Semitism extended the distance between Poles and Jews. It was obviously manifested in various forms and had its various advocates. Anti-Semitism was included into the programmes of some political parties of national-Catholic origin but it was also used by high and low ranked Church officials.<sup>64</sup> Anti-Semitic discourse was present in the nationalist and Catholic press (“Mały Dziennik”, “Rycerz Niepokalanej”). What is more, in the 1930s, anti-Semitism manifested itself in openly racist and discriminatory acts at universities. Jewish students were separated from the rest of students (*ghetto benches*); the number of Jewish students was limited (*numerus clausus*) or Jews were not granted the right to study at all (*numerus nullus*).<sup>65</sup> The rules of *numerus clausus* and *numerus nullus* applied also to the limited or denied access to Jews to some professions. In addition, in the years preceding World War II, violent acts against Jews and the destruction of their properties repeatedly occurred.<sup>66</sup> There

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61 K. Brandys, *Miesiąc. 1982-1984*, Warszawa 1988, p. 54.

62 Eva Hoffman used these words referring to the silence and collective forgetting about the Holocaust in postwar Poland, *Sztetl*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 6 II 1998, p. 10.

63 About living “next to each other”, particularly its causes, see: A. Hertz, *Żydzi w kulturze polskiej*, Warszawa 2003.

64 See: R. Modras, *Kościół katolicki i antysemityzm w Polsce w latach 1933-1939*, Kraków 2004.

65 See: M. Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto lawkowe, numerus nullus, “paragraf aryjski”*. *Antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931-1939*, Warszawa 1999.

66 See: J. Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935-1937*, Warszawa 1994.

were calls for the boycott of Jewish businesses and plans to solve the Jewish question in Poland.<sup>67</sup>

The distance between Poles and Jews was also strengthened by Polish stereotypes and prejudices towards Jews. Internalisation of these stereotypes was not necessarily equal to anti-Semitism. Most likely, people who simply did not like Jews, who saw them as competition and who shared stereotypes about them outnumbered declared, ideological anti-Semites.

Such an atmosphere of distance and separation prevailed when World War II broke out. Nazi occupiers realised their plan of the Final Solution before Polish eyes. As Franciszek Ryszka noted, however, neither the conclusions drawn from historical knowledge nor empirical manifestations of behaviour suggest that witnessing the Holocaust first-hand made Polish society significantly modify their attitudes towards Jews. Feelings and attitudes resulting from them remained as they had been, “in a wide variety of ethical views”. Also, anti-Semitism did not disappear “as if by magic”<sup>68</sup> after observing how the Germans treated the Jews. It is thus safe to say that the negative attitude towards Jews must have blunted moral judgement of the Holocaust both as it was taking place and after the war.

Anti-Semitism in Polish society was recorded by the representatives of the Polish Underground State in their memoranda. There were notes about it in the reports and commands of Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) and the Government Delegation for Poland.<sup>69</sup> Also the Courier Jan Karski informed General Władysław Sikorski, who was staying in France at the time, about the anti-Semitism in occupied Poland, but his note was repressed for many years.

The diagnoses enclosed in some documents of the Polish Underground State were probably right to say that the news about some Jewish acts in eastern Poland after 17 September 1939 intensified the anti-Semitic atmosphere and negative attitudes towards Jews within Polish society. The news was about Jews who welcomed the new occupiers with enthusiasm. It does not matter whether it was true or the image was hoaxed and transformed into myth on the basis of selec-

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67 See: A. Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu... Koncepcje rozwiązania kwestii żydowskiej w publicystyce polskiej lat 1933-1939*, Warszawa 1998; W. Mich, *Obcy w polskim domu. Nacjonalistyczne koncepcje rozwiązania problemu mniejszości narodowych 1918-1939*, Lublin 1994.

68 See: F. Ryszka, *Refleksje na temat holocaustu*, [in:] *Historia – polityka – państwo. Wybór studiów*, Toruń 2002, t. I, p. 317, 320.

69 See: J. T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada. Trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i Komunistów 1939-1948*, Kraków 2001, p. 46-47; K. Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm. Anatomia półprawd 1939-68*, Warszawa 1992, p. 15-20.