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Spaces that Remember, (Mis)remembered Places

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I am here today a Benjaminian storyteller - the traveller from afar telling a story about far-away places. It is a story of Polish eastern borderlands, the “remotest of the remote” locations. In a world of global flows of people, money and information, I believe that we can gain valuable information from studying microlevel “revolutions” in areas, that seem to be stagnant, undisturbed by world flows. If we look closely into peripheral corners of the world, we can see “domestication” of spaces, making oneself “at home” in estranged/unfamiliar places. This process emerges most clearly in spaces charged historically with war trauma, with a difficult past of multiethnic coexistence, with a cultural legacy of communities that have disappeared.

In the case of Poland, studying borderlands sheds light on democratic transformation, on local self-governance and a fragile and unstable civil society. Memory turned public plays a significant part in this dynamic.

My story is triggered by the process of the reclaiming properties that once belonged to the Jewish religious community.

In the period following WWII, properties that had belonged to religious communities were nationalized by the Communist state. The buildings were repurposed as schools, libraries, hospitals and sometimes as warehouses or storage spaces. Eight years after the dismantling of Communism, in 1997, the Polish Parliament passed bills regulating the restitution of these properties. The law envisioned three outcomes of a restitution claim. One would be that the religious institution would be able to reclaim the physical property, and the institution that had occupied it would be required to leave. In other cases, the public institution would be permitted to remain in the building, and the religious body would either receive financial compensation or another property in lieu of the claimed one.

In the case of the claims brought by the Jewish community, the situation is unlike any other: the properties eligible for restitution are mostly in remote areas of Poland, mainly

in small towns or villages, and there are no Jewish communities there currently. Restitution has created a peculiar situation: something that had been familiar became strange. By the power of a legal decision enacted far away, local landscapes in these communities changed overnight - with properties repurposed or renamed. The process created the presence of an architectural "Stranger".

This process also uncovered the complexities of the cultural-symbolic landscape of the Polish borderlands. After WWII this part of the country, once culturally and ethnically diverse, became mainly homogenized. Those who live there have often struggled with an uneasy multiethnic past. With the restitution process, that struggle, dismissed in the Communist official narrative, has now been brought back to the fore. One more "Stranger", therefore, was the suppressed memory of Polish-Jewish, or Polish-Jewish-Ukrainian relations, suddenly made public.

The reactions of the inhabitants emerged through a variety of new local initiatives. In many communities, the situation encouraged an emergence of local leaders and cultural activists to face the "stranger": documenting, caring for and commemorating the reclaimed properties.

Some of these initiatives were superficial, and faded with time. Others - like school programs or commemorative inter-religious commemorations - became part of activities held annually.

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I am researching three towns, Wielkie Oczy, Bircza and Rymanów, which before WWII were multiethnic *shtetls*, with a still visible (even if only partially) spatial and architectural fabric. All three spaces were "silenced", "denied", "repressed", and "made over" during the Communist era. This material "texture" of towns re-emerges now: symbolically – as a result of the reclaiming process and the general "multiethnic approach" favored in public discourse; and physically – as a result of demolition, decay, restorations, transformations of old and new buildings.

I remembered all three “townlets” from the time when the restitution claims were in progress, around year 2004. I was working for the legal representative of all the Jewish claims, the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland. When I came back to the towns in January 2014, after almost 10 years, the biggest shock was the change of the local landscapes.

Wielkie Oczy welcomed me with an impressive yellow building, the synagogue, with beautiful big windows and a shiny roof. For over six years after the legal reclaiming of the building, the local community of Wielkie Oczy negotiated with the Jewish owner to get it back, in 2011. The synagogue was renovated within two years and then turned into a public library and a meeting space for the local women’s association.

What is even more interesting is that I learned about this landmark even before I had a chance to see it. On the bus to the village, my newly acquainted interlocutors proudly listed local tourist “must-sees”, putting “our synagogue” on top of the list, together with the Catholic church and a Ukrainian Orthodox church.

Arriving in Bircza from Wielkie Oczy was another shock. Signs of the village’s multiethnic past have been carefully and systematically erased. The synagogue was demolished in 2005. The empty space was turned into a parking lot, with a little kiosk at the entrance, decorated with an image of Jesus. The Jewish cemetery, neglected and un-fenced, is now owned by the Jewish community. The building that once housed a *mikvah*, now privately owned, has been an abandoned construction site and there have been attempts to turn it into a store. Yet not only Jewish landmarks are vanishing -- so are two Ukrainian Orthodox churches.

Asked about tourist attractions, local inhabitants hesitantly point to the church and an old palace of the last landlord of Bircza. More eagerly, people refer to the memorials of the attacks of the Ukrainian nationalists in 1945 and 1946. My interviewees were generally very clear: “We are not interested in all these multiethnic things. Let

everybody take care of his own memory. We need to first take care of ours: of what happened to us here during the attacks. We have to tell the world the truth.”

The village was looted and attacked three times by the Ukrainian nationalist squads in 1945 and 1946, with many people bestially murdered. The graphic details of these killings are well known and retold in elaborate detail. And no wonder: almost every person living in Bircza has a relative who was killed at that time.

My trip to Rymanów was yet another story - and yet another shock. As a result of restitution, the synagogue there was returned to the Jewish community and sold to the Congregation Menachem Mendel from New York, a group of followers of a Chassidic master, Menachem Mendel of Rimanov. The building, which had remained a ruin since the end of WWII, was quickly adapted for worship by the new owners. And locked down. It is only open during the Chassidic pilgrimages. Although a Rimanovian holds the keys, it is very hard to reach him and he has clear instructions not to open the synagogue unless there is an important reason.

But that is not everything that goes on - and the Chassids are not the only strangers who emerged in Rimanov. In 2005 a group of four friends established an association whose main purpose is organizing the Days of Remembrance of the Jewish community in Rimanov. Although the members have some family ties to Rimanov, no one lives in the town. The Days of Remembrance are held in August, to mark an anniversary of the Jewish transport to the death camp in Belzec: a march of remembrance, from the town square to the train station, has been the main element. It would be accompanied by various cultural attractions: a concert of Jewish music, an outdoor performance of a Jewish wedding, etc. Given the association's financial struggle, the Days have been gradually less and less “festive”, with only one or two small events accompanying the march, that are open to public.

The local community talks about the association's activities with reserve. They find the event to be more and more exclusive, with many people coming from all over Poland to spend time amongst themselves. When I spoke to the parish priest, he expressed what many Rimanovians were thinking: “these outsiders steal our town”. Since the

establishment of the Days, three new commemorative plaques have been erected in town - all of them funded by the inhabitants. One commemorates a noblewoman, Anna Potocka, who was the owner of Rimanov and a philanthropist. Another commemorates families who hid Jews during the war. (One of those families was murdered by the Germans for doing so.) Finally, a memorial was erected to Polish soldiers from the region, who were murdered by the Soviets in Katyń.

In each townlet people talk about history differently.

In Wielkie Oczy they wanted me to hear, over and over again, how peaceful the pre-war coexistence was among Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian neighbors. The image of “our bishop” coming to town in 1930s, welcomed by a priest, a rabbi and a Ukrainian Orthodox priest, was emerging in narratives told by young and old, officially and in informal conversations. But, interestingly, there was also no hesitancy to speak about the non-heroic wartime: stealing from Jewish houses, refusals to hide them. One Polish family who hid Jews was denounced and killed by the Germans. As one of my interviewees summarized: “There were good guys and bad guys. We should feel ashamed for those who did wrong and remember the good ones”. Wielkie Oczy also experienced the attacks by the Ukrainian nationalist groups, although, fortunately, not to a large scale.

I was listening to these stories knowing that they were history. That the war is over. It is not over in Bircza, where the narrative of the Ukrainian crimes is repeated in graphic detail. The inhabitants admit that the Jews were executed in two groups, in two different locations on the hills, and the rest were sent to the Bełżec death camp. But it is mentioned as a side note, an insignificant element of the war narrative, dominated by the Ukrainian attacks. Often people would emphasize that there was not enough attention to their suffering; that no one acknowledged the tragedy properly. What that “properly” would mean is unclear. So is the fact that they demand “truth”.

In Rymanów, on the other hand, my interviewees would rush to tell the truth even if I didn't ask. It was the truth about heroic Poles, always ready to help the oppressed. It was also the truth about the Polish ownership of many Jewish houses - the answer to a question I never asked.

I have no time here to elaborate on the complex situation of Jewish private property in Poland. Neither it is my intention. I only want to point out that this situation was no less complex in Wielkie Oczy and Bircza - yet only in Rymanów would it stir local defensive attempts.

I want us to keep in mind these different ways of framing the past, when we look again at the three spaces. In each case Jewish restitution claims meant that a Stranger had returned to town in the form of a space that demanded to have its history recognized. The three different reactions show three faces of civil society because, in fact, it is the citizens of each town who organized actions to meet the Stranger.

In the first case, the space is domesticated: thanks to a communal effort a ruin from the past now serves cultural purposes and the memory about perished neighbors is kept alive. The local landscape fully belongs to its inhabitants and is shaped on their terms: our metaphorical stranger settled here and became assimilated (sic!).

The second space is erased, its parts only invested with meaning where they concern their current inhabitants. The landscape is devoid of any signs of presence of perished neighbors. The stranger that came to town with the restitution of Jewish property was exiled, to say the least. Gotten rid of. Anihilated.

The third space is transformed perhaps the most radically of all: the emergence of not quite metaphorical strangers not only alienated, but actually ex-territorialized the familiar places. The community remains a passive observer to the activities: both the ones concerning the renovated (and locked up) synagogue and the cemetery, and the ones organized annually in town. The decayed testimonies to the past, built into landscape - ruins of the building and the cemetery - were suddenly re-activated, but not addressed. Rather, they were taken away by outsiders.

The changes in legal ownership that I have just described need to be seen, then, together with changes in symbolic ownership. In a “feeling at home” kind of ownership. In being a householder of one’s home territory.

As we can see, the agency of the local community, whether “friendly” (as in the case of Wielkie Oczy) or “hostile” (as in Bircza), is a critical element to the process of “making oneself at home at last” - of absorbing and taming the unexpected spatial dynamics caused by external factors.

Ultimately, perhaps it is this agency, this power to transform the local space and invest it with meaning or divest it of any – perhaps it is this agency that allows for the “liberation” of local memory about Polish-Jewish past.

The three stories I have told convey a clear picture of three different responses to coming to terms with the past of important spaces that are essential to identity today. These responses cannot be fully understood unless viewed against the broader background of collective vernacular memory in Poland.

Under Communism, the official narrative about Polish-Jewish relations was a subject of propaganda. The regime at the same time suppressed the vernacular: ‘what people remembered’. The plaques commemorating Polish citizens as war victims, were devoid of any information about the ethnicity of these victims, thus suppressing the Holocaust and stressing Polish war losses.

New generations of Poles grew up in a mono-ethnic Poland, unaware of any multicultural pasts in their regions.

After 1989, though the policies of silencing and censorship were over, bringing the narrative about the Polish-Jewish past during the Second World War back to the public was a difficult and slow process. In 2000, together with the publication of the book “Neighbors” by Jan Gross about the crime committed in 1941 by Poles against Jews in a town called Jedwabne, ground-breaking public discussion urged public recognition of

Poles' non-heroic war past. Paradoxically though, this discussion limited the discourse about Polish-Jewish relations, narrowing it down to the war theme and moreover - to the very specific take on this theme. Vernacular memory was silenced again.

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It seems that what I am calling the “return of the Stranger”, caused by the restitution of Jewish property, served local communities as a trigger to think together and talk together about the past. To contemplate what matters. To relocate themselves within the space even more than to transform it. To create places, endowed with meaning.

One more space needs to be mentioned here, then: the Arendtian “space of appearance”, that emerges “wherever men are together in a manner of speech and action” - where they share words and deeds.

Perhaps this is the strongest image of this story - that in order to embrace the local past that may be not exclusively heroic, one has to feel at home there first. And that making oneself at home empowers; that it ultimately enables one to find closure and comfort in local historical narrative - and simply get on with the present and future.