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Hide and Seek with History – Holocaust Teaching at Polish Schools

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Teaching about the Holocaust in Poland has become more difficult. Based on interactions with Polish teachers and on a review of the field of Holocaust education in Poland as it evolved over the past decades, the article discusses and comments on the current situation where teachers are faced with curriculum changes, public campaigns against a "pedagogy of shame" and multiple pressures to teach a more 'patriotic' history at school.

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Hide and Seek with History – Holocaust Teaching at Polish Schools

“What types of problems have you encountered when teaching the Holocaust or working to commemorate the Holocaust?” This was the first question in a survey prepared for the Master Programme (Summer Institute) [“Teaching about the Holocaust”](#) in early July 2018, and it informed the full four days of discussion among the teachers who gathered here. Since 2006, the Summer Institute has been organised by the UNESCO Chair for Education about the Holocaust at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs (until 2017 also in cooperation with the [Centre for Holocaust Studies](#)). Educators from across the country are taking part in the training program. In 2015, it acquired the status of a Master programme. Although teaching about the bleakest chapter in human history clearly poses many didactic problems, the issues that the teachers reported in 2018 touched only indirectly upon questions of pedagogy. The major problems lay elsewhere.

25 Years of Holocaust Education

Teaching about the Holocaust has been a statutory element of the school curricula in Western Europe for about 25 years now: Such a moment demands reflection and taking stock. Analyses revealed considerable satisfaction with the state of affairs, based on the assumption that we have progressed in reaching pedagogical objectives, compared to the point of departure 25 years ago, and that the movement forward continues. How could it be otherwise? Improvements on the level of methodology and theory are evident, originating both from secondary schools and academic circles, which have been aided in their efforts to raise consciousness about the Holocaust by a number of favourable circumstance – most importantly: a broad interest reflected in popular culture (mostly cinema) and the support of institutions (from the European Commission to UNESCO to various foundations).

The same is true for Poland, which has been a member of the [International Holocaust Research Alliance](#) since 1999 and thus signed the 2000 ‘Stockholm Declaration’ which emphasises the importance of Holocaust education, remembrance and research. Previously, history textbooks had presented the Second World War as primarily a German battle against the Poles. Certain books did not mention the Jewish population at all, or quite blatantly elided their existence – as in this passage from a 1998 history textbook for primary schools: “In order to annihilate the Poles, the Germans opened concentration camps, the so-called death factories.”^[1] The need for changes to this narrative was very clear. Since the beginning of twenty-first century, all Polish history textbooks not only name the Jews as victims, but also – more often than not – present the Holocaust as an autonomous subject. The tragedy of the Jews is no longer relegated to a footnote to the story of the German occupation of Polish lands or contextualised within the suffering inflicted on the Christian population of Poland.

Literature classes include poignant works dealing with the fate of the Jewish community by Tadeusz Borowski, Tadeusz Różewicz, Andrzej Szczypiorski and Zofia Nałkowska; Anne Frank’s diary can be taken on as additional reading. Teachers can pick and choose between a number of training programs in Holocaust education offered by Yad Vashem, [the POLIN Museum](#), and the Memorial de la Shoah in cooperation with the national teachers training service, [ORE – Centre for Education Development](#). A number of NGOs have reached Polish schools with their both formal and informal educational opportunities about the Holocaust. Since 2008, for example, dozens of schools have participated in the [School of Dialogue’s Holocaust educational program](#), with pupils re-discovering the Jewish history of their own localities and gathering the knowledge necessary to dismantle existing prejudices.^[2] Scholars

have innovated existing teaching methodologies (and provided material for schools)^[3]; special academic units have been established to carry out research using still largely unexplored sources (for example the [Polish Center for Holocaust Research](#)). Simultaneously, those sources and analyses have only confirmed the hardly novel thesis that the history of the Holocaust involves more than Jewish victims and German perpetrators – contradicting the model still taught in Polish schools.^[4] This is problem number one.

A Problem of Believing

The participants of the 2018 Summer Institute – teachers of history, literature and religion – attended this event voluntarily.^[5] These were people of goodwill, open-minded and proactive, who felt the topic deserved special attention and special treatment, interested in learning about new tools and looking for opportunities for pedagogical and intellectual exchange. And yet, when attending lectures by the most renowned specialists in Holocaust research in Poland (such as Dariusz Libionka and Jan Grabowski), these same individuals were – more often than not – shocked and at times unable to believe the newest findings about the scale and nature of Christian Polish complicity in the crimes against their Jewish co-citizens. This incredulity arose, despite the passage of almost two decades since the revelations about Jedwabne (where Polish Christians killed their Jewish neighbours in 1941) had made a seemingly strong impression on Polish public opinion. When attempting to grasp how these professionals managed to remain under-informed of the broad level of moral complicity of Christian Poles, the psychological foundations of that cognitive resistance must be taken into account. Undoubtedly, the barriers that impede the internalisation of the scale of Polish transgressions against their Jewish neighbours lie in the need for a positive group identity, which is “a crucial factor preventing people from recognising such threatening historical information.”^[6] An equally important component of these teachers’ psychological defence mechanism is their social milieu, work environment and the influence of the current public discourse, which takes up the topic of the Holocaust eagerly, but presents it from a deeply politicised perspective. In Poland, the tragedy of the Jews was never about the tragedy of the Jews per se: It was always about how the remaining Poles behaved at the time. More recently, the Jewish tragedy in Poland has come back to serve solely as a weapon in the battle over Poland’s good name.

All Quiet on the Eastern Front?

Much of the controversy has to do with the recent turn away from the so-called “pedagogy of shame”^[7] toward the bizarre slogan that Poles should “get up from their knees,” which reflects a defensive and ‘patriotic’ use of history – a phenomenon also present in countries like Hungary, Lithuania, and elsewhere in the region. Although the term “pedagogy of shame” was meant to expose the attitude of liberal politicians and the media toward the Polish past, its popularity unsettled teachers and prompted them to issue a special statement about the teaching about the Holocaust. In February 2018, the Polish Teachers’ Association appealed to the media to stop using the term ‘pedagogy of shame’ due to its ungrounded and unscholarly character and its use in “justifying the denial of parts of historical knowledge”.^[8]

Changes to the curriculum observed by teachers in the past three years include the introduction of a set of protagonists meant to unconditionally boost national pride and confidence (such as soldiers of the Polish wartime underground army and the so-called ‘Cursed Soldiers’ of the anti-communist underground). On the subject of the Holocaust specifically, the most recent core curriculum envisages teaching the international and Polish reactions to the Jewish tragedy by highlighting the key roles played

by the Polish Righteous Among the Nations such as Antonina and Jan Żabiński, the Ulma Family, and Jan Karski.^[9] Discussion of reactions by others not classified as the Righteous is not specifically banned, but neither is it encouraged, leaving the issue for teachers to decide. The Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust on 27 January has begun to feature in the calendars of many Polish schools, but the commemorative focus has been on Irena Sendlerowa, a Polish woman who saved Jewish children. Thus, the day devoted to Jewish victims has yet again been turned into another occasion to celebrate the Polish Righteous. In Polish schools, priority was never given to critical introspection. The problem of looking for 'symmetry' illustrates this trend: Robert Szuchta, the POLIN museum expert on Holocaust education with 30 years' experience teaching in Warsaw's high schools, reports that there has always been a tendency in Polish schools to smooth out the process of teaching about the Jewish tragedy by including ample references to examples of noble Polish actions. If Polish *szmalcownicy* (the smugglers who betrayed Jews in hiding) are mentioned, then it will be followed by the obligatory reference to the fact that the Polish Righteous have the largest contingent of trees planted in their honour at Yad Vashem. In the last three years, this long-standing narrative has become much more pronounced. It is true that German textbooks also never miss the chance to thematise the White Rose movement and Colonel von Stauffenberg's attempt to assassinate Hitler. Yet, these 'good Germans' have usually been presented, at least in the recent decades, as curious exceptions to widespread German consent and complicity. In Poland, references to the Righteous are supposed to strike a balance between the good and the bad – and more recently, they are meant to outweigh the bad with the good.

Surprisingly, it was not the shift of those emphases and discourses that the participants of the Summer Institute lamented most, but a different kind of change within the schools, something not written and formalised, something that could be probably simply best defined as 'best practice' – namely, the support or acceptance given to teachers' actively engaged in educating students about both the heroic and bleak chapters of Polish history. This 'best practice' is being undermined through dissuasion or outright suppression of personal initiative.

Teachers feel that their proactive attitudes are now viewed with suspicion within the local communities they serve as educators. Examples of activities now understood as somehow demeaning include devoting more time (than planned in the guidelines) to the problem of the Holocaust, taking courses at Yad Vashem, the Daffodils social-educational campaign (*Akcja Żonkile*) commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising or visiting Holocaust or Jewish memorial sites with older pupils. The teachers report that they are no longer encouraged to attend additional training programmes on Holocaust education. Even if they find programmes themselves, with very few exceptions, they are not delegated by their employer to participate in such professional development opportunities, forcing them to apply for unpaid leave and pay for travel costs themselves. The long-established programme for educators co-organised by Yad Vashem and POLIN Museum in cooperation with the public Center for Education Development in Poland is now difficult to find online, although it still took place in 2019. However, one of its new coordinators complained that sending Polish teachers to Yad Vashem is tantamount to sponsoring anti-Polish indoctrination in Israel. This year the training in Yad Vashem was preceded by a visit to Poland's conservative Institute of National Remembrance.

Also, for the first time, the well-known school competition co-organised by the [Association Children of the Holocaust](#) together with POLIN Museum and the Jewish Historical Institute was postponed this year because an insufficient number of schools decided to participate. [This is unprecedented](#) in the 16-year history of the "Remembrance for the Future" programme.

Following the [controversies surrounding Poland's Holocaust legislation in early 2018](#) (which proposed

penalising statements that imply Polish participation in the Holocaust), it is perhaps inevitable that we have arrived at a moment where educators concerned with how best to teach the Holocaust – an event that took place where they live and work – are once again faced with old challenges. It would seem that ‘Jewish’ matters, recently perceived as a combination of the exotic and the peculiarly familiar (not least reflected via a number of popular TV series), have regained a negative connotation of unfamiliarity and potential danger.

Despite obvious improvements in the level of Holocaust knowledge and education in recent decades, Polish schoolteachers gathered at the Summer Institute regretted the lack of far-reaching reforms that would have allowed the Holocaust to be integrated into the general school curriculum. The Shoah does not feature in any broader teaching scheme about human rights and building respectful social relationships. Teachers can rarely propose any nuanced amendments to Holocaust education that would lead to a diagnosis of past national failings (which in Western European self-analyses have proven numerous). The Polish problem lies elsewhere – in the almost complete failure to reflect upon the necessity of teaching history as responsible citizenship. There is no central incentive and no requirement whatsoever to teach history critically, to identify and analyse the country’s past mistakes, and to educate a conscious and empathetic citizen capable of critical thinking. Instead, the common ‘product’ of present-day education in Poland is a self-centred ‘school-leaver’ who is unaware of the dangers dormant in the own human condition and unable to ascertain how to recognise and curb such dangerous tendencies. With some noble exceptions, history in Polish schools is still a discipline for its own sake: cramming facts – especially dates – into pupils’ heads without much consideration for critical thinking or how historical understanding influences a citizen’s behaviour. It is not meant to contribute to a pupil’s future as a social being, and nor as a *magistra vitae*. This is the second problem.

A Leap Back in Time: Literature Instead of History

Interestingly, teachers of literature have traditionally reported a greater freedom in putting together the message they want to convey. Using available options such as complementary reading lists (‘further reading’) or choosing the so-called *teksty kultury* carefully, they are able to establish connections between the material they teach and more general reflections on human nature based on references to ‘Holocaust literature’. Literature, no doubt, offers a depth of inspiration in this respect: just within poetry – the classic works on Polish Christian indifference towards the plight of the Polish Jews presented by Czesław Miłosz in his famous *Campo di Fiori*, as well as poems by Tadeusz Różewicz, Irit Amiel, and Wisława Szymborska (*Jeszcze*). The use of these works in the classroom is crucially important, even if the indifference they reference is still not akin to a discussion of actual active complicity. But such a lesson exceeds the boundaries of literary analysis and begins to acquire ethical dimensions.

In the meantime, the definition of ethics increasingly varies in the public sphere in Poland, and schools have become one of the most important battlegrounds for the government’s distinct vision of patriotic education and of society’s natural diversities. This is illustrated not only in history lessons, but also in recent state interventions in the school system as a whole, such as government sponsorships of programmes in defence of ‘Catholic values’, which oppose the “sexualisation of children at school”^[10] or the so-called ‘LGBT or gender ideology’. On a more general level, they also include the major school reform that backpedalled changes to the educational system back to how it functioned from the post-war decades to 1999 (thus cancelling junior high school) – and acted as an occasion to introduce major changes to the curriculum. Tired of the situation at their schools, teachers went on the largest strike since 1993 in spring 2019. They not only demanded better working conditions and more money, but also

vowed to “fight for a decent Polish school”, as Sławomir Broniarz, the head of the teachers’ union, declared [during a radio interview](#).

Just as the political creation of ‘a new Pole’ is unfolding before our eyes (a Pole who only perceives noble deeds in his collective past), so historians are coming under much more direct pressure from the government and certain elements of society. Curbing inconvenient or “not sufficiently Polish” narratives about the past has already led to several dramatic events – among them: the firing (or attempted firing) of non-party-line museum historians (for example, at the [Museum of the Second World War](#) in Gdańsk and the [POLIN museum](#) in Warsaw) and the budget cuts affecting established publication series (like *Zagłada Żydów*). Beyond openly hostile planned [legislation attempting to frighten ‘non-patriotic’ historians](#), young critical historians are quietly finding their careers in jeopardy (with state funding unevenly distributed among academic institutes). In all these causes célèbres, historians and their performance stand at the centre of attention.

Patriotism as Responsible Citizenship – Some Concluding Remarks

Patriotism has never excluded a self-critical approach. On the contrary. By way of example, here a letter written by young Ryszard Bychowski, a talented graduate of the prestigious Batory High School in Warsaw. Like thousands of Polish patriots in exile, Bychowski served as a pilot in Britain’s Royal Air Force during the Second World War. Just before his final flight over Germany in December 1943, the 22-year old wrote a letter to his father:

I tremble at the thought of what I write to you here, and there would not be a person happier than I if all turned out to be untrue. [...] I fear knowledge of the whole truth about the reaction of Polish society to the extermination of the Jews. I cannot live [...] with people who could have turned their backs on Jews in need of aid, people who managed to brush aside the Jews’ liquidation, to occupy their homes, and to denounce or blackmail the saved remnants.^[11]

Ryszard Bychowski’s fears about the society in which he was raised turned out to be true. What Poland – as any other country – needs now is responsible, self-critical patriotism based on the virtue of an engaged citizenry rather than ethno-national sentiment and pride. This can be achieved by raising interest in new research, however painful its results might be, and by engaging pupils in more critical forms of reflection on history. Inviting pupils to learn about the Jewish past of their localities has had an impact. History teachers have a unique role to play in this task – they are able to engage with past mistakes to create a better present, one in which the images from Ryszard Bychowski’s letter would never torment a European youngster again.

The past cannot be changed, but – even if it is a terrible truism – it is able to teach. In the present political atmosphere in Poland, however, the majority of teachers are all too often afraid to face this truth and to bring about positive change.

Footnote

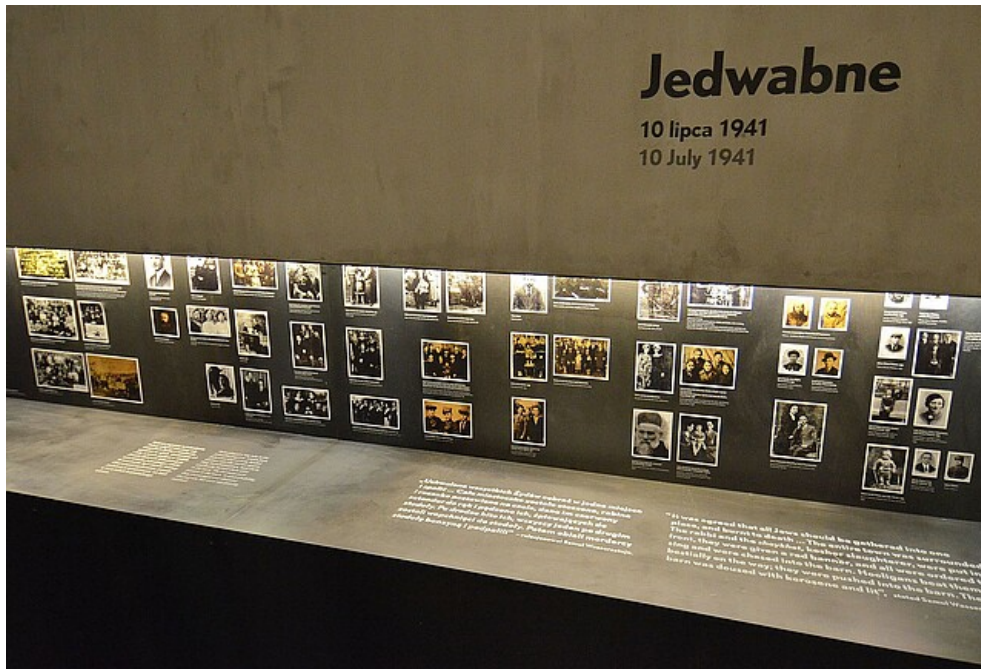
1. Jerzy Centkowski, Andrzej Syta, *Podręcznik dla klas czwartych*, Warsaw, 1998, p. 102. See the analysis by Anna Mach, *Świadkowie świadectw. Postpamięć zagłady w polskiej literaturze najnowszej*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2016, p. 29.
2. See also Lynn W. Zimmerman, *Jewish Studies and Holocaust Education in Poland*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.
3. Robert Szuchta, Piotr Trojański, *Jak uczyć o Holokauście. Poradnik metodyczny do nauczania o Holokauście w ramach przedmiotów humanistycznych w zreformowanej szkole*, Warsaw: Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, 2012.
4. See for example the works by Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs and Robert Szuchta, *Wybór źródeł do nauczania o Zagładzie Żydów na okupowanych ziemiach polskich*, edited by Alina Skibińska and Robert Szuchta, Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2010; Bogusław Jędruszczak, Wiesława Młynarczyk, Robert Szuchta, *Ćwiczenia ze źródłami do nauczania o Zagładzie Żydów*, Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2010.
5. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Spotkania z Zagładą w Polsce*, *Politeja* 2 (2017): 23-49; Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *The Uses and Abuses of Education about the Holocaust in Poland after 1989*, *Holocaust Studies* 25, no.3 (2019): 329-350.
6. Marta Witkowska, Michał Bilewicz, *Czy prawda na wyzwoli? Przełamywanie oporu psychologicznego w przyjmowaniu wiedzy o Holokauście. Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały* 10 (2014): 514-532.
7. See [Jarosław Kaczyński's statement](#) at a press conference following President Barack Obama's use of the expression "Polish death camp", 30 May 2012, retrieved 1 July 2019.
8. See *Stanowisko Prezydium ZG ZNP ws. nauczania o Holokauście*, znp.edu.pl (14 February 2018), retrieved 2 July 2019.
9. [Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego dla czteroletniego liceum ogólnokształcącego i pięcioletniego technikum 2018](#), Załącznik Pierwszy, 2018, p. 130.
10. See [the speech by Jarosław Kaczyński](#) at a conference entitled "To be Polish – pride and duty", printed in *Włocławek*, 24 April 2019, retrieved 18 July 2019.
11. Ryszard Bychowski, *A Letter to Father*, in *Focusing on the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, Volume 13, edited by Antony Polonsky, Warsaw: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000, p. 193.



Opening discussion at the 2018 Summer Institute on Holocaust education in Poland
Author: Kamil Reichel



Participants at the 2018 Summer Institute, including the author
Author: Kamil Reichel



Part of the Holocaust gallery dedicated to Jedwabne pogrom in the permanent exhibition of the POLIN museum of Jewish history

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