

Challenges to Preservation of Holocaust Memory in Poland

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Abstract

Holocaust memory in Poland has faced various challenges in its development and preservation in the last twenty years. Notably, widespread antisemitism and the political atmosphere has caused memory to form differently in Poland than in its surrounding nations. Holocaust memory is dynamic and fragile, meaning it is constantly being influenced by Polish politics, media, and institutions. Previously, historians commonly defended one of two main perspectives: that Poles were heroes or helpless bystanders, or that Poles were active perpetrators in crimes against Jews. This original binary thinking ignores additional nuances such as the prevalence of nationalism in Polish history, as well as generational suffering following the Holocaust. Building upon a third perspective introduced by Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, this paper discusses Poles as both victims and perpetrators taking into account these additional nuances and further examining societal attitudes, Poland's educational systems, and the attitudes of young people in Poland today.

Article

Introduction

On October 5th, 2021, Auschwitz-Birkenau was vandalized with antisemitic and Holocaust denying phrases.¹ While antisemitic desecration of the place where millions of Jews were murdered during World War II may be especially shocking, these hateful attitudes expressed by the vandals have been growing in Poland. The Institute of National Remembrance, established in 1998, once played a pivotal role in clarifying Holocaust memory by investigating the role of Poles in pogroms and other historical crimes against Jews occurring between November, 1917 and July, 1990.² However, in 2003, when the Institute of National Remembrance exposed ethnic Poles as the sole perpetrators of the Jedwabne pogrom of 1941, in which they trapped a large group of Jews inside a barn and burned it down, there was a dramatic increase in discussions surrounding Holocaust

¹ Jaclyn Peiser, "Nine Barracks at Auschwitz Death Camp Were Vandalized with Antisemitic, Holocaust-Denying Phrases," *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/10/06/auschwitz-birkenau-vandalized-holocaust/>.

² Institute of National Remembrance, "Mission," Institute of National Remembrance, August 14, 2006, <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/about-the-institute/mission/2,Institute-of-National-Remembrance-Commission-for-the-Prosecution-of-Crimes-again.html>.

memory in Poland.³ Suddenly, analyses like Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, which had been published in 2000, received backlash for being "anti-Polish" and misrepresenting Catholic Poles during the Holocaust.⁴ The book's publishing publication triggered the initial investigation, causing many to blame Gross for reintroducing this discussion to the public sphere. The Institute of National Remembrance is now heavily influenced by the currently ruling political party: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS or Law and Justice Party) in Poland whose nationalistic goals thwart hinder discussions of Poles as perpetrators of Holocaust crimes. Additionally, PiS began to pass legislation that has stifled historical research surrounding Jewish-Polish relations and history. These events are signals that Holocaust memory and discussion in Poland have developed to be an atypically contested topic compared to surrounding European nations. Because Polish legislation has reflected and reinforced broader Polish attitudes and history education has been historically traditionally utilized as a medium for nationalism, Holocaust memory has developed differently in Poland than other nations, especially which is particularly evident in the resistance towards discussions of Poles as perpetrators and focusing the focus on the victimization of Poles.

In 2018, the controversial "Holocaust law" criminalized accusing Poles of being perpetrators of war crimes. If found guilty, accusers could be sentenced for up to three years in prison. After backlash from influential allies like Israel and the United States, the Sejm (Polish Parliament) amended this law so that imprisonment was no longer a potential consequence.⁵ Regardless, this law still holds influence today and has been referenced in recent court cases. In February 2021, a district court in Warsaw found Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engleking, the authors of *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski (Night Without End: The Fates of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland)*, published in 2018, guilty of "violating the honor" of a Polish man who was the mayor of a small village in Nazi-occupied Poland.⁶ The plaintiff in this case was the niece of the man discussed in the book, and the court ordered the historians to issue a public apology.

Furthermore, as of 2007, the Ministry of National Education reviews textbooks and only allows those that coincide with the Ministry's new core curriculum to be used in schools.⁷ This educational reform severely limits what textbooks teachers are allowed to utilize in their classrooms, and the texts they are allowed to choose from all have a strikingly similar tables of contents. Most recently in August of 2021, PiS passed yet another law that prevents former property owners in Poland, including Holocaust survivors and their descendants, from recovering property seized by the nation's communist regime following

³ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴ Mikhal Dekel, "Poland's Current Memory Politics Are Rewriting History," *Boston Review*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/polands-current-memory-politics-are-rewriting-history/>.

⁵ Adam Easton, "Poland Holocaust Law: Government U-Turn on Jail Threat," BBC News, June 27, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44627129>.

⁶ Dekel, "Poland's Current Memory Politics Are Rewriting History."

⁷ Krzysztof Jaskułowski, Piotr Majewski, and Adrianna Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism: School History Education in Poland* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

World War II, once again reflecting the nation's political climate and efforts to suppress Holocaust discussion.⁸

The predominant perspective of Polish public opinion seems to accept that some Poles did in fact commit crimes during the Holocaust, but this past should not be discussed deeply in depth. Polish citizens and historians vary on how much blame should be placed on Poles for their crimes, although generally Polish people do acknowledge ethnic Poles to be perpetrators of Holocaust crimes in some capacity.⁹ Nevertheless, nationalism is widespread in Polish society resulting in many Poles being protective of their nation's history, prioritizing honoring those who were heroes and avoiding discussing the shameful history that may taint the Polish image. Since the fall of the communist regime in Poland, nationalism has been deeply rooted in Polish values and history education. It is increasingly difficult to acknowledge the truth when one's entire education solely focuses on the narrative of the heroes without acknowledging any of the perpetrators.¹⁰

As a result of major legislation and discussion in mainstream media, historians have taken one of two main positions: that Poles were either heroes or helpless bystanders, or that Poles were active perpetrators in crimes against Jews.¹¹ In "Politics of Innocence: Holocaust Memory in Poland," Kornelia Konczal reports on the historical arguments that put forward this claim that Poles were either heroes or helpless bystanders.¹² This claim is founded on the idea that helping Jews put Poles' lives at risk and that reluctantly giving them up to the Nazis would allow Poles to save themselves.¹³ To oppose this perspective, Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engleking in their book *Dalej jest Noc*, provide countless examples of Polish people who committed crimes against Jews during the Second World War, in addition to the massacre at Jedwabne.¹⁴ Other historical examples include individuals who had willingly sold wood to the German authorities to build concentration camps.¹⁵

This binary thinking that has dominated the historiography fails to take into account the complexity of circumstances and human actions. An additional factor that most historiography fails to consider is the delicate nuances of generational trauma as a potential reason for Poles defending themselves and their actions. Nevertheless there are two

⁸ Vanessa Gera, "Poland Passes Law That Would Cut off Property Claims," AP News, August 11, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-poland-laws-aff8252937db7f5b8e3653f71e7726bb>.

⁹ Adam Szostkiewicz, "Bulwersujący Wyrok ws. Autorów Książki „Dalej Jest Noc” [“Shocking Verdict vs. Authors of Book „Night without End”], Polityka.pl., February 9, 2021. <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/2103329.1.bulwersujacy-wyrok-ws-autorow-ksiazki-dalej-jest-noc.read>.

¹⁰ Wojciech Kalwat, Piotr Szlanta, and Andrzej Zawistowski. *Historia 8: Podręcznik: Szkoła Podstawowa* [History 8: Textbook: Primary School] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne Spółka Akcyjna, 2020).

¹¹ Kornelia Konczal, "Politics of Innocence: Holocaust Memory in Poland," *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (2022): 250–63.

¹² Konczal, "Politics of Innocence."

¹³ Konczal, "Politics of Innocence."

¹⁴ Dekel, "Poland's Current Memory Politics Are Rewriting History."

¹⁵ Beth Holmgren, "Holocaust History and Jewish Heritage Preservation: Scholars and Stewards Working in PiS-Ruled Poland," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 96–107, doi:10.1353/sho.2019.0004.

historians who do acknowledge not only Poles' nationalism, but also generational trauma, when discussing the roles of Poles as victims and perpetrators in the Holocaust. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs and Jan Gross have contributed to Holocaust memory historiography by introducing a third viewpoint: Poles were both victims of Nazism and perpetrators during the Holocaust. Many Poles had collaborated with Nazis and committed crimes against Jewish Poles. Moreover, many non-Jewish Polish people also suffered during the Holocaust and in concentration camps. Gross emphasizes that "when reflecting upon this epoch, we must not assign collective responsibility. We must be clear headed enough to remember that for each killing only a specific murderer or group of murderers is responsible."¹⁶ Likewise, those who lived in Poland throughout the course of the Second World War experienced a war-torn nation that had collapsed and fallen to the Nazis overnight. This collective trauma of living through a gruesome war is a contributing factor to conflicts over historical memory as many Poles see themselves as victims of the Nazis. Although Polish trauma is considerably different from Jewish trauma in the grand scheme of the Holocaust, it is a contributing factor to conflicts over historical memory. Non-Jewish Poles had a different lived experience than Jewish Poles and Jews in general, but they experienced a gruesome war nonetheless.

Additionally, as mentioned, nationalism is a core Polish value that needs to be taken into consideration when discussing Polish education and Holocaust memory. When discussion of the Holocaust assigns blame to groups of Poles for Holocaust crimes, many Poles become defensive in protecting their country's honor. Despite the amount of time that has passed since World War II, Polish nationalism is deeply rooted in Polish history, and education has been consistently used as a medium for further instilling Polish patriotism in youth. The recent legislation created by the PiS is significant in shaping attitudes about the wartime experience, but it is not the direct reason why Holocaust education and discussion is difficult. Rather, the new laws are contributing factors, since the rising power of the PiS and their recent Holocaust-related laws are in turn a reflection of the preexisting attitudes of many Polish people. Focusing on these nuances of generational collective trauma, history education as a medium for nationalism, political legislation as a reflection of broader Polish attitudes, and an overall lack of nuance in understandings about the Holocaust, this article will investigate how Holocaust memory has developed differently in Poland than other nations and explore potential reasons for why it has developed this way.

Memory

Memory is a concept that is difficult to define as it can be applied in a variety of contexts. Memory as a phenomenon can be defined as the way that individuals persistently learn over time through storing and retrieving information.¹⁷ Memory can also be trained to become a process, but the preservation of memory "has the character of a material object" as it has become a part of the present that is actively being shaped, uncovered, and clarified.¹⁸ In the context of history, memory is what is remembered about a certain event,

¹⁶ Gross, *Neighbors*, 134.

¹⁷ Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory: The Landscape of the (Non)Memory of the Holocaust in Polish Education between 1989-2015*, first edition (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 27.

time period, or group of people in history. This includes the sentiments surrounding the events and individuals involved. Most importantly, historical memory also involves what is not remembered, or is intentionally erased from history. Memory holds many meanings and functions for the present and the future, as memory allows humans to learn from the past and also plays a role in the development of “contemporary political culture, its norms, values, rules and attitudes through the choice of what our societies should remember.”¹⁹

Holocaust memory, like historical memories more generally, are particularly fragile, susceptible to influence, and emotionally charged. The collective memories of Holocaust survivors and their loved ones “are loaded with strong emotions and evaluations of facts and personalities” that allow individuals to reevaluate them.²⁰ Not only does Holocaust memory consist of the experiences of individual people, but also groups of people and their collective personal, social, and political experiences.²¹ In this way it is constructed like a complicated puzzle, but depending on who, or which group, is building the puzzle, the portrait does not quite turn out the same. There are also circles of society from which memories diffuse. For example, while knowledge regarding the pogroms in Poland was known in academic circles among scholars, this information had not become part of the collective consciousness until popular media began to scrutinize the findings of the Institute of National Remembrance.

The preservation of historical memory has a physical property, meaning that it is kept in textbooks, historical artifacts, news articles, and more. It is also important to note that textbooks and written articles are made by people. This Holocaust memory lives within real people who experienced the event themselves or learned about the event. There are tangible objects and people that hold Holocaust memory meaning it is particularly susceptible to change, whether that is intentional or not. Memory is affected by culture and institutions, including schools, media, and churches as they influence perspectives.²² All current events further shift perspectives and ideas of the past and current politics can resemble or relate to historical events and figures.²³ Because perspectives are changing, historical memory inevitably changes over time. Similarly, memory can be intentionally altered by institutions that want to highlight a certain perspective, for example, to maintain a certain identity, support a present political situation or figure, and more.

Recent Contestations over Historical Memory in Poland

Poland was previously thought to be doing groundbreaking work in terms of Holocaust studies. Monica Rice claimed in 2018 that “Polish scholars have been at the cutting edge of Holocaust research” with its focus on Polish-Jewish relations.²⁴ In the previous twenty years of research prior to the 2018 Holocaust law and recent controversy, Polish scholarly “memory of its Jewish past has demonstrated an impressive commitment to coming to

¹⁹ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 27.

²⁰ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 28.

²¹ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 30.

²² Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 29.

²³ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 29.

²⁴ Monika Rice, “With Anti-Semitism on the rise, can Poland come to terms with its past?,” *America* 219, no. 11 (2018): 28.

terms with its history,” especially compared to other nations such as Ukraine and Lithuania who have yet to face their transgressions of World War II.²⁵ Beth Holmgren believes that it was during the initial twenty-five years following the fall of the Soviet Union where Jewish studies became “well established at several major Polish universities” and “professional relationships among Polish, Israeli, and American educators and activists increased.”²⁶ There was controversy among politicians and academics in 2003 with the discovery by the Institute of National Remembrance about the Jedwabne pogrom and in 2008 with the educational reform, but it was not until the 2018 “Holocaust law” that the controversy infiltrated popular consciousness. This resulted in the greatest amount of mainstream backlash, with the debate regarding Holocaust memory becoming a hot topic on news outlets, blogs, and social media. Furthermore, the rise of Prawo i SprawiedliwośćPiS in Poland resulted in setbacks in Holocaust historiography. As a result, the suppression of historians’ crucial work in recent years is particularly unfortunate.

In the present day, Polish historians and writers are fearful of writing about Holocaust memory, as those who do so are “bombarded by ‘a barrage of hate mail.’”²⁷ The authors of *Dalej jest Noc* were just one example of historians that fell victim to the public eye when they were accused and sued for “violating” a Pole’s honor. Grabowski’s father, who is a Holocaust survivor himself, believes that the current national atmosphere and general attitudes of Poles resemble those of the 1930s.²⁸ Jan Grabowski’s Ttwitter (now X) feed has been filled with hateful messages and negativity to the extent that his mother fears being attacked when walking the streets of Warsaw with her son. Even those who comment on Grabowski and Engleking’s text become targets of Polish resentment. In *The New Yorker*, Masha Gessen wrote about the authors’ trial and discussed Poland’s attempt to exonerate itself and its people of the death of three million Jews.²⁹ This commentary resulted in a flood of backlash that included death threats and other hate mail being sent to Gessen. When a *New York Times* article reviewed Mikal Dekhel’s book, *Tehran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey*, it discussed Poles who “equate Polish and Jewish suffering” to create “a vision of ‘shared’ history.”³⁰ Unsurprisingly, angry Poles came to Dekhel’s tTwitter page to voice their disapproval. This public response to Holocaust memory discussion in Poland stifles scholarships and deters historians from publishing works on this topic. Those that are brave enough to do so expect to suffer the consequence of Polish retaliation.

Historians are not the only ones receiving hate mail as these popular attitudes have also infiltrated educational spaces in Poland, greatly influencing the attitudes of both teachers and students, altering the learning environment. These opinions become concrete barriers when parents and community members send hate mail to teachers and historians. Magdalena Gross studied a group of non-Jewish teachers who decided to implement a new

²⁵ Rice, “With Anti-Semitism on the rise, can Poland come to terms with its past?,” 30.

²⁶ Holmgren, “Holocaust History and Jewish Heritage Preservation.”

²⁷ Dekel, “Poland’s Current Memory Politics Are Rewriting History.”

²⁸ Dekel, “Poland’s Current Memory Politics Are Rewriting History.”

²⁹ Dekel, “Poland’s Current Memory Politics Are Rewriting History.”

³⁰ Dekel, “Poland’s Current Memory Politics Are Rewriting History.”

curriculum and increase their own knowledge of the Holocaust in Poland.³¹ Her interviews with the educators revealed considerable backlash from parents as multiple teachers had received hate mail at their homes that included rhetoric such as “No more Jewing up the curriculum” and “How are your Jews today?”³² This fearless display of antisemitism by parents illustrates blatant opposition for teaching Polish-Jewish history. Considering the hate mail as a potential reflection of parental attitudes suggests that youth may be learning from their parents to push back against education about the Holocaust. This idea will be crucial later, as learner attitudes are also important in the efficacy of comprehensive Holocaust education. The parents who send these messages to educators are likely also expressing these ideas at home, discouraging their children from further investigating Holocaust history. Teachers are therefore constantly being discouraged from teaching about Jewish as Holocaust history as they may be putting themselves and their safety at risk if they choose to do so.

In addition to these parental attitudes, widespread and increasing xenophobia and antisemitism among Polish politicians and Poles in general poses a major hindrance to Holocaust education. The Centre for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw conducted a study in 2013 where 69 percent of respondents revealed that they do not want non-white people living in Poland.³³ This highlights that an overwhelming majority of Poles not only hold, but admit to holding, xenophobic attitudes. Similarly, Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs recreated her own 1998 study as closely as she could in 2008 to investigate how these attitudes towards foreigners and minorities have developed over the past decade. The minorities discussed in this setting included Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, Roma, and Russians. In the 1998 study, about one third of the national sample believed that some of the minorities living within Poland could harm Poles and the Polish nation.³⁴ In 2008, this number shifted to every fifth individual in the national sample believing that Poland and the Poles could be harmed by minorities living in Poland.³⁵ Despite xenophobia and antisemitism presumably decreasing since 1998, as of 2008 roughly 20 percent of the nation still openly expresses fear of minorities, illustrating that xenophobia persists among the Polish population. This particular study does not differentiate between which specific minorities produce the most fear or hate from Poles, but the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage investigated this further asking participants questions about being in romantic relationships with, sitting in class next to, or attending the same school as the presented ethnic group. This study concluded that Roma and Jews were among the minorities least welcomed in Poland across these presented social situations indicating the steadfastness of antisemitism in addition to xenophobia as Poles continue to consider Jewish people to be one of the most unfavorable minorities in Poland.³⁶

³¹ Magdalena H. Gross, “No longer estranged: learning to teach the Holocaust in Poland,” *Holocaust Studies*, 24, no. 2 (2018), 131-49, DOI: 10.1080/17504902.2017.1380922.

³² Gross, “No longer estranged,” 131.

³³ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 214.

³⁴ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 215.

³⁵ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 213.

³⁶ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 217.

Poles' relative willingness to admit to their xenophobic and antisemitic beliefs speaks to the sociopolitical atmosphere in Poland and what ideas, beliefs, and speech are tolerated. In addition to the legislation that bans discussion of Poles as perpetrators in the Holocaust, current politicians in Poland that have come to power throughout the reign of the PiS Party have used their platforms to spread antisemitism and xenophobia, creating an atmosphere conducive to hostility. Jarosław Kaczyński, who is the leader of the PiS Party and arguably the most powerful politician in Poland, warned Poles about the "parasites transmitted by the refugees."³⁷ This is imperative because when individuals see their politicians publicly and fearlessly declaring foreigners to carry "parasites," it further cultivates an environment where this type of speech is accepted and supported.³⁸ Kaczyński made this statement ahead of the last parliamentary election and nevertheless, succeeded in holding his seat.

Another PiS politician, Zbigniew Girzyński, made a similar detrimental comment about Islam being a "violent religion" and that even "Muslim children are a deadly threat" to the Polish nation.³⁹ Later, Jarosław Gowin, who once served as the Polish Minister of Justice and was nominated as politician of the year, stated that his main role as a "Polish politician is to prevent anyone from ever blowing up a Polish newborn."⁴⁰ He has since been dismissed from serving in the Sejm and the Polish government entirely due to homophobic comments. But the former two politicians, Kaczyński and Girzyński, continue to hold prominent positions within the government. The comments of these powerful men reflect that Polish society may have a larger threshold for xenophobic, Islamophobic, and antisemitic comments as it takes many offensive remarks for a politician to lose support.

Although not all hate speech is tolerated in Poland, there seems to be a greater intolerance to foreigners. In fact, once politicians began openly expressing xenophobic ideologies, these attitudes became more and more present in mainstream, popular culture. For example, in Polish hip-hop music songs warn "against the Islamisation of Poland," which may explain why politicians who make hateful anti-refugee statements are not removed from power.⁴¹ This rhetoric has successfully infiltrated Polish society and is no longer restricted to the right, as some liberal Poles have been drawing on Islamophobic imagery as well.⁴² This phenomenon allows for prejudice and bigotry to become a larger component of Polish society. As a result, politicians that take advantage of these ideas and choose to advocate against immigration continue to be reelected. This phenomenon creates an echo chamber where once people begin to broadcast their hateful ideas, their behavior is reinforced and more people continue to spread hatred. This xenophobia may exist because Poland is one of the most homogeneous nations in Europe in terms of ethnicity and religion, but politicians continue to fuel this hatred.⁴³ Therefore a combination of these factors create an environment in which open xenophobia, antisemitism, and contempt can grow in multiple

³⁷ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism*, iix.

³⁸ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism*, iix.

³⁹ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism*, iix.

⁴⁰ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism*, iix.

⁴¹ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism*, iix.

⁴² Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism*, iix.

⁴³ "World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples: Poland," Minority Rights Group International, July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/country/poland/>.

realms of society, including education, which is now full of obstacles to discussion of comprehensive Holocaust history.

To examine why the sociopolitical environment may have formed to be conducive to xenophobia and antisemitism, it is important to return to the concept of trauma and emotional stress as it has a deep influence on memory. Traumas, as defined by psychoanalysts, refers to “overwhelming events not processed at the time of their occurrence.” The memories associated with the emotional distress of displaying cowardice or potential complicity in crime is particularly strong as these feelings can create intense guilt and shame.⁴⁴ According to Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, there are also a variety of different ways to deal with this type of emotional suffering. For example there is “working through” trauma and “acting out” trauma.⁴⁵ The former involves recognizing the source of one’s emotional distress and assists in avoiding projecting anxieties onto scapegoats, while the latter refers to the repetition of one’s emotional stressors or the original event.⁴⁶ This repetition is often called transference, particularly when the stressor is generational.

The emotional distress of the Holocaust in Poland has been transmitted across multiple generations. Generations referring to varying age groups of individuals who had an experience with the Holocaust. The original generation refers to those who were adults during the time of the Holocaust, but there are other age groups of individuals who were emotionally affected such as those who were very young during the Holocaust, those who were born to parents that endured the Holocaust, and those who have grandparents and great-grandparents that were alive during the atrocity. Survivors are still living in Poland today, but more prevalently are the Polish kin of survivors, victims, and perpetrators. Dealing with unprocessed emotional suffering, or not doing so at all by blocking memories, results in “values, myths, and behaviors” being “transmitted from generation to generation providing vicarious experience.”⁴⁷ Because narratives of family members as perpetrators during the Holocaust are typically neglected, children and grandchildren are likely raised hearing alternative oral stories focusing on what their loved ones had to endure, many of whom they may have been unable to meet while they were still alive. Many families are holding onto these oral histories along with photos, journal entries, and other important artifacts that are pieces of their family history from the Second World War. To the families, all of the relatives' lives lost are heroes and to think of them that way brings them peace. Therefore discussion of Poles as perpetrators tends to feel like an attack on Poles because that is not the way they know and understand their family history.

Transmission of family knowledge along these generations has created an established Holocaust history for each family. Discovering an alternative truth may be especially emotionally difficult since the original story came from their family that they loved and trusted, and was accepted by other family members. Collectively, families share this history therefore it is distressing when a historian makes the claim that many Poles were in fact,

⁴⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

⁴⁵ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 34.

⁴⁶ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 34.

⁴⁷ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 32.

not the people that present Poles thought they were. Even for historians, Holocaust memory is difficult to digest. Following his research of the Jedwabne pogrom, historian Jan Gross held onto his knowledge for four years before he could bring himself to articulate the history and write *Neighbors*.

Ultimately, this element of emotional stress puts Poles in a position where they are unsure of where to place themselves and their family in history. It is difficult to think of a loved one as a perpetrator when they were originally believed to be a victim. This complicates Polish historical memory because one cannot reasonably claim that all Poles were perpetrators or all Poles were victims. The lack of nuances in understanding Holocaust narratives, although it may not be unique to Poland, plays a large role in this nation's difficulty in discussing Holocaust memory. The traumatic event itself will always have the greatest effect on the victim, but "it also affects everyone who comes in contact with it: perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, resisters, those born later."⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud commented on this idea of screen memories. In terms of psychic splitting, this means that historians, victims, perpetrators, or outsiders of the trauma simply split perpetration and victimhood without acknowledging more complex scenarios such as those in which individuals can be both victims and perpetrators, but also in which victims can become the perpetrators.⁴⁹

The Role of Teachers and Education

As many Poles and their families have deep, interpersonal, and emotional ties to the Holocaust, discussion of it inevitably influences all members of the population in some capacity, including teachers. Subsequently, educators' and educational administrators' attitudes towards history education and the Holocaust impacts what youth are taught in schools. While there are educators who choose to teach Jewish history and comprehensive World War II history despite the backlash from parents, many teachers hold antisemitic views themselves and consciously choose not to discuss Jewish Holocaust history in their classrooms. In 2010, in response to Magdalena Gross's survey, one teacher named Tomek stated that the greatest challenge for those who sought to teach Holocaust history is other teachers. He told the story of a colleague who recently quit working in the middle school of a small town near Warsaw, as her coworkers chanted "None of those Jews today! Żadnych Żydów dzisiaj!" as she entered the school building each day.⁵⁰ This anecdote illustrates that especially in smaller towns, teachers who seek to teach the Holocaust have a lack of support. These daily comments from colleagues, like the hate mail from parents, is incredibly discouraging and hinders teachers' ability and desire to continue teaching about the Holocaust. The offensive chants from the colleagues mentioned implies that they themselves do not teach and actively oppose teaching comprehensive Holocaust education. This creates a cycle where the educators who do believe in teaching adequate Holocaust history are intimidated and tormented by those who fiercely oppose it and, like the teacher who quit working at the middle school near Warsaw, will eventually choose not to implement it in their classrooms.

⁴⁸ Dominick LaCapra and Mazal Holocaust Collection, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 9.

⁴⁹ Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁵⁰ Gross, "No longer estranged," 138.

Despite varying teacher attitudes towards Jews, the Polish curriculum for history education itself is designed to promote nationalism and a nationalistic version of Polish history. The Polish history curriculum has consistently played an important role in promoting and maintaining Polish honor. Although it started before then, it was strengthened in the communist period following World War II where the centralized education system had one “party-approved” textbook for each grade.⁵¹ This meant that educators at each grade level were provided with a textbook that they were required to teach. They were not able to choose their own textbook or teach content outside of the book. After the fall of the communist regime, educational reforms introduced a new core curriculum that focused on contradicting communist teaching portraying communism as a cataclysm rather than the peak of Poland’s success. In 2008, an additional educational reform kept primary school history the same, covering ancient history to modern history, but lower secondary schools (parallel to American middle schools) only learned history from ancient times to 1914. Then, students’ history schooling depended on what they wanted to study in upper secondary school (similar to American high schools). In their first year of secondary school, pupils learn an overview of history from 1914 to the present. Students who choose history as a major subject in secondary school would continue to learn broad periods of history in greater detail, but those that choose other subjects are mandated to take “History and Society.” This course is an alternative that focuses on various historical time periods and issues.⁵² The 2008 reform initially frightened right-wing journalists and politicians as they feared that not knowing enough about “Poland’s past” would “erode their national identity.”⁵³ This was viewed as a catastrophe that would threaten “the existence of the Polish nation,” highlighting how a potential change from a nationalist model of historical education was undesirable for many.⁵⁴ Despite their worries, the reform reinforced nationalism and continued to focus on primarily Polish history.

Although the primary school curriculum contains discussions of “civic participation, social sensitivity, tolerance, and ties with groups of different scales,” the core curriculum for history education in Poland continued to focus on teaching primarily the history of the Polish nation.⁵⁵ Conversations about social issues and tolerance are reserved as minor, insignificant topics that may or may not be discussed in the classroom depending on the teacher. In the example of the primary school curriculum, the subject of “History and Society” is divided into thematic blocks. There are a total of 17 thematic blocks and 12 of those “concern exclusively Polish history and the remaining 5 are devoted to general history, but they also contain Polish themes.”⁵⁶ Similarly, an overwhelming 80 percent of history for youth in the first grade of primary school is political history, “with a prevalence of national history content” and “a strong synchronization of Polish history with European and world history.”⁵⁷ This is the wording used in the official commentary of the curriculum

⁵¹ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, ix.

⁵² Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, ix.

⁵³ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 18.

⁵⁴ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 18.

⁵⁵ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 19.

⁵⁶ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 19.

⁵⁷ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 19.

as approved by the Ministry of National Education, highlighting that history education continues to focus on Poland and promoting nationalist ideology. In the core curriculum, the Polish nation is constantly emphasized as the “main object of loyalty.”⁵⁸ The Ministry further explains this, by saying that the goal of history education is to “instill values associated with tradition, especially homeland tradition.”⁵⁹

Educators are able to choose their own textbooks, albeit they must choose books from a list approved by the Ministry. Because reviewers are appointed to evaluate the books based on their “compatibility with the core curriculum,” many of the books have similar, if not identical, tables of contents.⁶⁰ Additionally, educators are given the illusion of choice, but all Polish history textbooks are published by one of three publishers that have monopolized the market.⁶¹ According to the Ministry of National Education, the textbooks used in schools should be “deeply rooted in the Polish tradition of teaching history” and absolutely should not “discuss controversial issues such as the scale of Poles’ participation in the Holocaust.” This accentuates the idea that there is a connection between protecting Polish honor, and abstaining from discussing comprehensive Holocaust history.⁶²

This can be seen in practice in *Historia 8*, an eighth year history textbook developed by Wojciech Kalwat, Piotr Szlanta, and Andrzej Zawistowski where the Holocaust takes up a total of 6 of the 235 pages. The headers in this section include: Dwa oblicza niemieckiej okupacji (Two faces of the German occupation), Terror, Różne postawy wobec okupanta (Different attitudes towards the occupier), Zbrodnia jakiej nie widział świat (A crime unlike what the world has seen), Powstanie w getcie warszawskim (Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto,) and Polacy wobec Holokaustu (Poles in the Holocaust).⁶³ In the section Różne postawy wobec okupanta (Different attitudes towards the occupier), the textbook features one sentence to state that some people living in Nazi occupied land collaborated with the occupiers. Immediately afterwards, the section takes several sentences to say that many Poles were particularly resistant to Nazi occupation and participated in various diversion tactics and sabotage.⁶⁴ Additionally, Polacy wobec Holokaustu (Poles in the Holocaust) stresses the consequences of being caught helping Jews in the Holocaust and tells the heroic stories of Irena Sendlerowa and the Ulmów family.⁶⁵ Irena Sendlerowa helped around 2,500 Jewish children by creating false documents that would allow them to escape the Warsaw ghetto and, when that was no longer an option, organized places for them to hide with families.⁶⁶ The Ulmów family hid two Jewish families, and when discovered, the parents and six children were shot and killed.⁶⁷ The textbook does not make any mention of Poles as perpetrators, only one sentence says some were collaborators. There was also no

⁵⁸ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 19.

⁵⁹ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 19.

⁶⁰ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 20.

⁶¹ Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 20.

⁶² Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak, *Teaching History*, 19.

⁶³ Kalwat, Szlanta, and Zawistowski, *Historia 8*, 22.

⁶⁴ Kalwat, Szlanta, and Zawistowski, *Historia 8*, 23.

⁶⁵ Kalwat, Szlanta, and Zawistowski, *Historia 8*, 23.

⁶⁶ Kalwat, Szlanta, and Zawistowski, *Historia 8*, 23.

⁶⁷ Kalwat, Szlanta, and Zawistowski, *Historia 8*, 23.

mention of Holocaust memory, or comment on any explicit Polish crimes. *Historia 8* reflects the requirements of the Ministry of National Education and entirely omits the nuances of Polish involvement in the Holocaust. These brief six pages do not adequately encompass all the essential components of the Holocaust in Poland and instead emphasize Polish heroism illustrating how Holocaust memory has developed in Poland.

Conspicuously, this results in students solely believing Poles to be heroes during the Holocaust and creates a foundation for nationalist ideology. If Poles were to be confronted with knowledge that contradicts this belief, it would be easy not to believe it. Not only because of potential family ties to the event, but also because their education specifically taught them that Polish individuals had helped Jews during the Holocaust and that Poland led the strongest resistance to Nazi rule. This intentional curriculum makes it difficult for Poles to learn new information that contradicts this narrative throughout their education. Unless a student chooses to study history at the university level where most comprehensive Holocaust discussion and scholarship occurs, they may never be exposed to a narrative that strays from the Polish core curriculum.

Even well-intentioned educators that attempt to fight the core curriculum have often internalized these nationalistic ideas themselves. Even if they are not antisemitic or intentionally avoiding Holocaust memory, they avoid discussion of Poles as perpetrators either because they believe this narrative tarnishes Polish honor or because it is undoubtedly uncomfortable. It is not that these educators are particularly susceptible to internalization, but rather that nationalism is exceptionally closely tied to Polish identity. Magdalena Gross writes of a Holocaust education program designed for teachers that took place at a university in Poland in 2010. In this six day program, sixty teachers from all over the country participated in workshops administered by historians from Israel, the United States, and Poland.⁶⁸ The first survey question asked educators: “What does being Polish mean to you? What does identity mean?”⁶⁹ Most teachers expressed a national identity by attributing a character such as traditions, cultural leaders, language, and land to the Polish nation, demonstrating that “being Polish” is both an ethnic and a civil identity. A teacher in the program responded saying that the “bottom line” for being Polish is “protecting the national symbols and national memory of our great ancestors” and “a feeling of collectiveness with one of the greatest histories in the world” further exhibiting the importance of the Polish national identity.⁷⁰ Even though this program about Holocaust education for educators is voluntary and participants are relatively well-intentioned, this quote highlights how Polish nationalism, either consciously or subconsciously, is ingrained in Poles.

Following the survey, educators were asked to respond to a scenario in which a student comes to class and says: “You cannot be Polish and Jewish at the same time.”⁷¹ Many educators immediately sought to introduce the students to examples of individuals who

⁶⁸ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 133.

⁶⁹ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 134.

⁷⁰ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 134.

⁷¹ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 135.

were Jewish Poles. The wording they used suggested that Polish and Jewish identities were independent of one another. Educators expressed trying to find examples of “‘a Pole who felt Jewish,’ ‘a Pole who was also Jewish,’ or ‘a Jew who was a Pole.’”⁷² Providing examples that students can understand makes sense, as youth tend to learn new material best when given discernable examples, but then the educators provided names of what Poles refer to as, “Polonized Jews.” “Polonized Jews” are Jewish Poles who were artists or cultural figures where “Polonized” refers to a type of cultural assimilation, where a population that is considered to be non-Polish takes on Polish characteristics.

It is essential to note that Polish identity and Roman Catholicism are heavily intertwined. As a result, Jewish Poles who create art or make major contributions displaying their loyalty to Polish society may then be considered Polish, but are considered Polonized. Teachers’ depiction of Jewish Poles as providing an artistic service to Poland illustrates the educators’ positive intentions of providing their students with great examples of Jewish Poles, but highlights educators’ prioritization of Jews’ contributions to the Polish nation in order to call them Polish. Educators further explained that “one can love two fatherlands at the same time, their cultures and nations, and identity with them,” but the implication of this idea is that “one can feel both Jewish and Polish, that the two can coexist but not commingle.”⁷³ This exposes the reality that Poles, no matter how well-intentioned they may be, often see Jewish and Polish identities as disassociated, making it difficult to teach tolerance and adequate history since Jewish history is seen as separate from the history of the Polish nation.

The educators in the program later experienced struggles in regards to incorporating “Jewish experience into the Polish curriculum as ‘normal history’” and sought to present Jews as “normal people” when Jewish history should be presented as a part of Polish history.⁷⁴ For these educators, what is “normal” is equivalent to what is Polish. This issue further develops this idea that one can feel Jewish and one can feel Polish, but these identities are separate. This creates issues as it continuously separates the two ideas, suggesting that they are somewhat antithetical. This contributes to the idea of Jewish Poles as the “other” in Poland and that they are a threat to Poland, rather than a part of the country and its rich, and at times disappointing, past.

The history of Polish nationalism stems from before the communist regime, with nationalist ideas peaking around the 1930s. At that time, Polish nationalists focused on assimilating Slavic minorities and enacted many discriminatory policies like limiting the number of Jews that could attend a given university.⁷⁵ Communist rule actually strengthened homogeneity in Poland as the communists intentionally adopted nationalist politics in order to increase their legitimacy among Poles. Throughout the communist regime, nationalism grew because the nationalistic movement was the rebellious movement against the communists. As a result, nationalism is an essential part of Polish history that has consistently governed

⁷² Gross, “No longer estranged,” 135.

⁷³ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 139.

⁷⁴ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 139.

⁷⁵ Jaskółowski, Majewski, and Surmiak. *Teaching History*, 21.

most of its politics for the last ninety years. Because nationalism is deeply rooted in society, discussions of the Holocaust and Poles as perpetrators is uncomfortable and confusing for Poles as it conflicts with their Polish identity.

As a result, the event of the Holocaust presents “a confusing rupture in Polish history and tradition” as it presents a “sudden challenge to the Polish national narrative.”⁷⁶ This may play a role in why memories of the Holocaust are suppressed and why the narrative of Polish heroism is emphasized instead. For Poles that seek to learn more and expand their knowledge about the Holocaust, what they encounter does not “fit with the overarching meta-narrative of national progress or resurrection,” forcing Poles to question not only the education they have received, but their entire identity.⁷⁷ When considering that many Poles have family histories that are intricately intertwined with the Holocaust and World War II, it is unsurprising that many Poles are distraught upon discovering the appalling actions of many Poles during the Holocaust. It causes one to wonder whether their family could have been involved in something so horrendous. Because Polish identity is developed as a collective national identity, Poles will defend Polish honor as if they are indeed defending their own close family relatives. This highlights how discussion of the Holocaust has become so taboo in society and how nationalism is the preeminent value in society, so that discussion of Poles as perpetrators feels like an attack on Poles and the Poland nation.

Young People: The Future of Holocaust Memory in Poland

Focusing on young people in Poland that are immersed in this nationalist environment, it has become evident that there is a lack of knowledge regarding Jewish history and Jewish-Polish relations. Teachers in Magdalena Gross’s study expressed concerns that Polish youth come to school full of stereotypes about Jews which they believe to be rooted in ignorance and a general lack of knowledge of Jewish history and culture.⁷⁸ In addition to the survey questions about negotiating Polish-Jewish identities, Gross surveyed teachers regarding their understanding of youth attitudes, asking “What ideas do students bring to class about the Jews and why?”⁷⁹ An overwhelming 60 percent of educators responded saying that students brought stereotypes and negative attitudes, while the other 40 percent of respondents gave specific examples of negative attitudes such as “students are negative about Jews because they don’t know them.”⁸⁰ Educators also shared experiences where students had repeated antisemitic slurs, saying that students were doing so “without any knowledge of Jewish culture or the Polish-Jewish past.”⁸¹ Educators cite this rhetoric and offensive language to be one of the largest barriers in teaching Holocaust memory, as any conversation about Jewish culture induces slurs in the classroom. Teachers speculated on where they believe these beliefs come from, many believing the home to be a major source of information for students.

⁷⁶ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 140.

⁷⁷ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 135.

⁷⁸ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 137.

⁷⁹ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 137.

⁸⁰ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 137.

⁸¹ Gross, “No longer estranged,” 132.

Ambrosewicz-Jacobs sought answers from the young people themselves, asking participants aged 16 to 17 where they obtained their knowledge of Jewish people and culture. In her 2008 study, 74 percent of students listed the media such as television, film, or radio as their source of information, 52 percent named books, newspapers, and journals, and 28 percent said family and conversations with family members.⁸² 22 percent of respondents had also cited the church as a source of knowledge, but without additional clarifying survey questions, it is unclear what kind of information was being transmitted and whether it was positive or negative.⁸³ In similar studies done by historians Ireneusz Krzemiński and Michał Bilewicz, Arkadiusz Tomaszewski, and Adrian Wójcik, large percentages of students had cited schools to be one of the main sources of Holocaust and Jewish knowledge. In general, school was a prominent source of information according to 46 percent of young people in Krzemiński's study (2004) and 79 percent in Bilewicz et al. (2008).⁸⁴ Krzemiński's study had focused on indicators of antisemitism, and Bilewicz, Tomaszewski, and Wójcik focused on knowledge and opinions about Jews in Poland. Seeking more information regarding this component of education, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs had added questions in her 2008 study, asking students to identify a specific "school factor" that contributes to their Jewish education.⁸⁵ Almost half of students listed religious education lessons, 49 percent said lessons at school, and only 3 percent indicated extracurriculars conducted by teachers, illustrating the massive influence of religious education on Polish youth.⁸⁶

Despite there being an overall lack of knowledge, Polish young people have formulated negative attitudes towards Jews and minorities, entering the classroom with preconceived notions and beliefs. Because Polish youth must unlearn many of their ideas that they hold about other groups of people because of their attitudes, there is an immediate barrier that must be broken in order to teach comprehensive Holocaust education. In 2013, the Center for Research on Prejudice of the University of Warsaw implemented a poll with the assistance of the Homo Homini polling institution, right before the 70th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This survey contains responses from twenty technical schools and high schools in Warsaw, where 61 percent of youth said they "would not have been happy to discover their partner is Jewish."⁸⁷ Similarly, 45 percent would have also been unhappy to discover that there is Jewish origins in their family, 44 percent would not want to have Jewish neighbors, and 40 percent would not want to have Jewish peers and classmates in school.⁸⁸

The attitudes of young people displayed here reflects the overall lack of effectiveness of Holocaust education and the strong influence of popular media and politics. Antisemitism is so strong among youth that almost one in three of respondents in Ambrosewicz-Jacob's survey thought that it was preferable that there are fewer Jewish people in Poland now

⁸² Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 222.

⁸³ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 223.

⁸⁴ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 223.

⁸⁵ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 223.

⁸⁶ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 223.

⁸⁷ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 217.

⁸⁸ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 217.

than before World War II. When asked why this was the case, just under half of participants said this because of “conflicts from the past” highlighting the belief that the historical relationship between Poles and Jews is “conflictive rather than cooperative.”⁸⁹

Conclusion

The attitudes of young people illustrate how embedded these beliefs are in Polish society, and it may take several generations for these ideas to change entirely. Young people are commonly referred to as the future, and if that is the case then it appears the future may look regrettably similar to the present. The evolution of Holocaust discussion over the last twenty-five years frames how Polish society has created an atmosphere that has been fostering discriminatory ideas among youth. This sociopolitical environment has become well established and may require an equivalent length of time, if not longer, to unravel. It will require conscious effort, especially on the part of learners and young people to open up and want to learn about Holocaust memory. This change will need to be intentional and with present attitudes, this change may take some time.

The emotional stress transmitted across generations will dissipate as the amount of time since the event increases, but it is clear that many young people currently attending primary and secondary school in Poland are still experiencing some degree of distress transmitted by the previous generations. Hopefully more time will provide room for the trauma to be properly processed, and for Holocaust memory to be repaired. But as time increases and generational trauma begins to resolve, other issues arise. Memory is already full of lapses and tricks, and as survivors who directly remember the Holocaust pass away, there are fewer individuals on Earth that are able to discuss their lived experiences. Afterwards we must rely on these transmitted stories. Historical memory must be preserved intentionally and carefully or it will fail to exist. Historian Dominick LaCapra emphasized that there cannot be a single narrative of the Holocaust, and that a variety of perspectives are essential in preventing a single, fixed meaning of the Holocaust from forming.⁹⁰ Therefore it is essential that the upcoming generation of young people in Poland is able to dismantle the suffocating echo chamber created by politicians, mainstream media, and the generations before, to allow Holocaust discourse to continue freely.

⁸⁹ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 220.

⁹⁰ Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, *Islands of Memory*, 32.