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THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING: THE HISTORICAL FACTS AND THE POST-WAR PUBLIC DISCOURSE

1.

This year we are celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Such events always present opportunities to look back. However, in looking at the past we are also looking at the present, for the past is always perceived through the lens of our own times. The form of the anniversary celebrations, the official speeches, and any other commemorative events or actions are always focused on the here and now. Historical events can only reveal the significance or character permitted them by our contemporary viewpoint – we can only see them through glasses made 'here and now', so to speak, not 'there and then'. Therefore I wish to offer a broad outline of some of the basic historical information, as a background to the question of the postwar use and abuse of the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in the public discourse. In other words, in this paper I will move from the historical event itself to its interpretation; from facts to confabulations; from historical accounts to political or ideological manipulations.

2.

It is important to emphasize the significant difference between the historical ghettos (such as that in Frankfurt, established in 1462; that in Venice [1516] and that in Rome [1555]) and the ghettos created by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust.

Historical ghettos

Jews in the diaspora usually lived together in one part of a city (which was known as the Judengasse in German, the Jewish quarter in English, or the Judacaria in Italian). This arrangement was advantageous for two main reasons: firstly, it accommodated their religious, social, and cultural habits, and secondly it provided them with a greater sense of security. They tried to ensure that they lived together for mutual protection from threats, assaults, violence, etc.

Over the course of time the internal, voluntary tendency of the Jews to gravitate towards each other and live together in one place was confronted with external pressure to live separately and in isolation from Christians. Jews were labelled and ordered to live in ghettos — specially designed areas, usually surrounded by walls. Let us reiterate this: Jews had to live within the walls, but they were free to leave the ghetto during the day, though they had to return there for the night.

Nazi ghettos

The main purpose of the historical ghettos was to separate and isolate the Jews from Christians, but in the Nazi ghettos separation and isolation were merely interim means to a different end: extermination. The Germans' immediate aim was to concentrate the Jews near railway routes. This was the reason why they forced all Jews to gather in designated places: small ghettos in the country, large ghettos in the cities, and transit ghettos. The catastrophic conditions of life in the overcrowded ghettos led to 'indirect extermination'. Ultimately, the Jews gathered in the ghettos were transported directly to death camps.

In summary, the distinction between the two types of ghettos is as follows: the historical ghettos were created as Jewish districts intended for living. The Nazi ghettos were special districts where the Jews were forced to live, on pain of death; they were sealed, overcrowded, and

completely isolated from the outside world (the 'Aryan side'). Nazi ghettos were places for dying, dreadful 'waiting rooms' before the 'final solution' of total annihilation.

3.

The Warsaw Ghetto was sealed on 16 November 1940. Between October 1939 and July 1942 approximately 100,000 Jews in Warsaw died from diseases – above all a typhus epidemic, caused by the catastrophic living conditions and lack of sanitation – or starved to death. Holocaust historians call this 'indirect extermination'. On 22 July 1942, *Grossaktion Warschau* (the 'Great Deportation' campaign) was launched. Over the next two months, until 21 September, some 300,000 Jews were taken away directly to the gas chambers in Treblinka death camp. This was the turning point in the history of the Warsaw Ghetto. First and foremost it was now obvious to the rest of the Jews in the ghetto that 'resettlement to the East' meant death and nothing but death.

As a consequence of the great deportation to Treblinka death camp the population of the Warsaw Ghetto was reduced to approximately 60,000 Jews, most of them young and determined to resist further round-ups. The Jewish underground started to prepare for armed resistance. Civilians began to construct shelters, bunkers, and other hiding places. They started to stockpile food and other supplies. In January 1943 the Germans attempted to take away another quota of Jews, but in some areas of the ghetto they met with armed resistance, albeit chaotic and disorganized. On that occasion they rounded up only 5,000 people before withdrawing. This experience was a tremendous breakthrough for the Jews, for their perception of the situation, and for their awareness of what was really happening.

On 19 April 1943, early in the morning, the Germans again entered the ghetto. This time, however, the Jews were well prepared and waiting for them. They opened fire on the troops, and many German soldiers were killed or wounded. German blood was spilled on the ghetto streets and pavements.

Two main paramilitary forces coordinated and led the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The larger, Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ŻOB, the Jewish Fighting Organization), at its peak numbered 500 young people, who were armed with rifles, pistols, homemade hand grenades, and bottles filled with petrol (Molotov cocktails). The second,

Żydowski Związek Wojskowy (ŻZW, the Jewish Military Union), numbered a maximum of 260 fighters, and could even boast some machine guns. The Jewish insurgents faced Germans troops and auxiliary forces numbering approximately 5,000 soldiers and policemen, all fully armed, and in possession of cannons and tanks.

On the first day of the uprising the ŻOB fought a victorious battle at the junction of Zamenhofa and Miła Streets, and Gęsia and Nalewki Streets (today these two sites are in the immediate vicinity of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes by Rapaport and the building of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN). The ŻZW fought on Muranowski Square. After three days of heavy combat the Jewish fighters were forced to leave their positions, and withdrew to the cellars and bunkers, from which they waged an urban guerilla struggle, in hiding. The Germans set fire to house after house, and soon the whole ghetto was in flames.

One issue which I would like to emphasize is the fate of the civilians in the ghetto. This is an entirely separate chapter of the uprising. It is important to realize that fewer than 1,000 Jews (of the 60,000 trapped within the ghetto walls) were capable of armed combat. The remaining 59,000 civilian Jews spent this time sitting in hiding beneath burning houses, squeezed between the hot walls of the cellars. The Germans hunted them down relentlessly. When they discovered a hideout, they threw in poison gas canisters, and then dragged the Jews out of their underground hiding-places. Some were killed on the spot, and the rest were led to the railway siding known as the Umschlagplatz, forced onto trains, and deported to death camps (Majdanek, Trawniki, Poniatowa, and Treblinka).

On 8 May 1943 the Germans located the bunker at 18 Miła Street, where 120 people were in hiding: both civilians and Jewish fighters from the ŻOB command, among them Mordechaj Anielewicz, their commander-in-chief. The ŻOB fighters committed mass suicide. On 16 May, at 8.15 p.m., the Germans blew up the Great Synagogue in Warsaw as a symbolic signal that they had succeeded in suppressing the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. After the end of the uprising, SS-Gruppenführer Jürgen Stroop, the commander of the German troops, wrote the notorious Stroop Report (which included daily reports of the fighting). In 1945 he was captured by American forces, and after being extradited to Poland he was put on trial, convicted, and executed on 6 March 1952.

4.

The Holocaust destroyed virtually the entire Jewish community in Poland. It turned the Jewish world to ashes, but even as the survivors were attempting to rise from those ashes after the war, they were once again subjected to persecution and violence. At both individual and community levels there was a series of pogroms in Poland in the immediate aftermath of the war. At the official level, between 1944 and 1950 the communist government imposed step-by-step restrictions on the reviving social and cultural life of the Polish Jews, which culminated in the ultimate liquidation of Jewish political parties, social organizations, co-operatives, and newspapers. The last straw was a series of waves of emigration. If we assume that in mid-1946 there were around 200,000 Jews (including 130,000 arrivals from the Soviet Union) living within the pre-war borders of Poland, then the 63,000 who left Poland in the first two months after the July 1946 Kielce pogrom alone constitute an enormous figure. On the whole, over the period 1945–1947 around 160,000 Jews emigrated from Poland in the first and largest wave of emigration. The second wave, over the years 1955–1960, numbered over 55,000 Jews. The third wave of emigration came after March 1968, when a state-sponsored antisemitic campaign prompted – or, more accurately, forced – around 13,000 people to emigrate (with one-way passports) between 1968–1971.

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The Holocaust became a subject of manipulation in post-war Poland before it could be processed thoroughly and independently. It was avoided one way or another, familiarized, and instrumentalized, but at the same time used as a tool in matters of political or ideological strife. In the Polish People's Republic, where the state practised censorship and exercised a monopoly on information, the Holocaust fell victim to the nationalization of the collective memory and became one element of the Communist Party's version of history. The Polish Catholic Church, which is highly conservative and made almost no move to accommodate the Vatican II reforms, not only did nothing to combat anti-Jewish prejudices in the consciousness of its faithful, but often actually upheld them. On the other hand, it was Catholic intellectuals who were the main driving force behind reflection on the Holocaust, the cultural heritage of the Polish Jews, and the coexistence of Poles and Jews.

Open public debate in which all parties could be involved and freely articulate their points of view only became possible after 1989 in the newly democratic Poland. The period of political transformation was a time of reevaluation and reconstruction of the canon of tradition. First of all this was a process of reclaiming areas that had been taken over by Communist propaganda, a process of restoration of memory. The memory of the Holocaust was revised in that context, and was one of the factors conditioning the new grasp on national identity in the democratic Poland.

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The extermination of the Jews that took place in Poland, in the presence of the Polish people, and unfortunately sometimes also with Polish participation — blackmailing, extortion, and even killing — is, whether or not Poles are willing to acknowledge it, a substantial part of the Polish fate and a facet of Polish history. Is there any other experience of such universal significance as the Holocaust? The Holocaust (and especially Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust) exists in the Polish conscious and subconscious. I would go so far as to say that the full dimension of the Holocaust experience, the terrible truth, mostly exists in the Polish subconscious, very often suppressed or simply rejected. When we ask about the presence of the Holocaust in the Polish public discourse, we are asking first of all about forms of remembrance and about the narrative strategies connected with what is one of the pivotal events of the twentieth century.

The memory of the Holocaust has many dimensions. There is the collective memory and the individual memory, the memory of the victims, the memory of witnesses, and the memory of the persecutors. There is the memory of people who received help, care, and friendship, and the memory of those rejected, betrayed, or sold. The memory of innocent suffering can give birth to either protest or reconciliation; it can give rise to hatred and a desire for revenge, or arouse a longing for justice and compensation. It is the memory of humiliation, shame, helplessness, and passivity. The memory of heroic revolt and struggle. The memory of resignation and defeat. The memory of absolute loneliness and rejection by an insensitive world. The memory of an absent and silent God.

The memory of the Holocaust is the remembrance of a wound that has not healed, but at the same time the memory itself is wounded.

Wounded because it is torn between the possible and impossible, between the human and inhuman, between the duty to bear witness and the conviction of the inadequacy of language. Torn because of the fundamental question: Is it possible to pass on the heritage of memory to anyone else, to future generations? The terror of those experiences, which cannot be comprehended or expressed, paradoxically clamours loudest to be put into words. The constant duty to reawaken memory clashes with the desire for alleviation of the pain of that reawakening, with the danger of the trivialization of that memory, and with the prevailing tendency towards a collective amnesia.

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The press texts written to mark the successive anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising betray the salient features of the Polish narrative concerning the Holocaust. There are two main motifs, or modes of narration, which emerge from a reading of these texts: *'Competition in suffering'*, and '*The "Polonization" of the Uprising'*.

Since the very beginning, these anniversary discourses have evinced a discernible strain of rivalry in martyrdom (or competition in suffering). The journalists who contribute to them seem compelled to defend the value of the Polish martyrdom, which is apparently imperilled by the magnitude of Jewish suffering. This theme surfaces with particular force in a propaganda piece from around March 1968, i.e. on the 25th anniversary of the uprising. Polish aid to the embattled ghetto is also one of the central motifs that are constantly present in the anniversary discourse. Moreover, in the background to this motif there have always been disputes about who helped and to what extent, who avoided helping, and what the real scale of the aid was. The story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is thus transformed into a story of Polish aid and valour, the uprising itself instrumentalized as a foil for the heroism and help that the Poles offered to the ghetto fighters, and as proof of the existence of a Polish-Jewish brotherhood in arms.

This narrative reached its zenith, as shown above, in March 1968. The images generated at that time, by the Polish press on the one hand and by the Polish-language Israeli press on the other, are completely different from each other, their versions of events polarized. Newspapers in the Polish People's Republic emphasized the Poles' moral solidarity with the Jews, and even claimed the same perspective – that of biological extermination – for both nations. The Polish-language press

in Israel stressed the indifference of both the Poles and the entire outside world to the Jewish fate, the loneliness of the Jews persecuted in Poland, and their feeling of having been abandoned. The Poles pitted their own martyrdom against the Jewish suffering in a form of competitive opposition, and defended their image of 'the wartime Pole' against the criticism inherent in the Jewish version of this hypothetical representative figure. Accusations of distortion of history and of calumnies founded on hatred of Poland and the Poles are widespread. On the other hand, the Jews were outraged at attempts to Polonize the uprising and to pass over the fundamentally Jewish character of the Holocaust in silence, and fought to prevent such versions of events being disseminated. Indeed, they accused the Poles not only of indifference, but also of active collaboration in the attempted extermination of the Jews.

The reason I make such emphatic reference to this propaganda discourse from the time of the Polish People's Republic is because in fact it is still being echoed in the public sphere today, revealing an astonishing durability and longevity. Indeed, in recent times these tunes have been replayed quite loudly in the public sphere.

1993 was the 50th anniversary of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the commemorative events were held in the context of the independent Poland, with the former Communist party monopoly on public communication lifted and censorship a thing of the past. At that time, new themes emerged in the anniversary discourse. During the ecumenical service held to mark the occasion in the Nożyków synagogue in Warsaw, Archbishop Muszyński made the following appeal: 'May we – Catholics and Jews – become a blessing to each other and a blessing to the world.' At a special commemorative session of the United States Congress, Andrzej Zakrzewski, the chairman of the Presidential Council for Polish-Jewish Relations, told of the loneliness of the ghetto defenders. In his speech delivered beneath the commemorative plaque dedicated to Szmul Zygielbojm[1], politician and social activist Jacek Kuroń said: 'I lived in that valley of death, I looked at the murdered Jews, and in my soul I bear that guilt of the sense of helplessness.' These words about guilt and responsibility are a response to Jan Błoński's essay 'The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto', which

1] Zygielboym was one of the leaders of the Bund, and during the war a member of the National Council of the Polish Government-in-Exile. In May 1943 he committed suicide as a protest against the indifference of the world in the face of the extermination of the Jews.

was published in the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* in 1987, provoking a firestorm of controversy.

5.

Let us move forward to the present, to the Poland of 2018.

On 6 February 2018, the President of the Republic of Poland signed the Act amending the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. The highly controversial Article 55a evoked a storm of protest both in Poland and abroad. This article reads: '*[Anyone] who publicly and in contravention of the facts ascribes to the Polish Nation or to the Polish State responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich (...) or for other offences which are crimes against peace [or] humanity or [that are] war crimes, or who otherwise grossly reduces the responsibility of the actual perpetrators of said crimes, is subject to a fine or [to] a maximum of three years' imprisonment.'* This legislation was widely received as an attempt to constrain the freedom of academic research and as a violation of freedom of speech.

Polish historians have never denied that in broad swathes of the Polish populace there was never any stigma attached to involvement in the destruction and despoliation of the Jews. Historians have never blamed 'the Polish nation' as a whole for crimes against the Jews. We know perfectly well that some Poles displayed extraordinary heroism and risked their lives and those of their loved ones in bids to rescue their Jewish neighbors. No one denies these facts. Nevertheless we cannot close our eyes to the fact that there were those who on a local level took an active part in the *Judenjagd* (the hunt for Jews). These included the Polish 'Blue Police', who collaborated with the Germans; village and township heads nominated or retained by the Germans; members of fire brigades; and ordinary citizens of every socio-economic class. This is a painful truth, which has been meticulously documented and described in detail by historians.

Nonetheless, it must be stated clearly—this is no time for equivocation—that whatever the role of certain elements of the local population in Poland (and elsewhere), the ultimate responsibility for the Holocaust lies with Nazi Germany. All the death, forced labour, and concentration camps on Polish soil were established and run by the Germans who ruthlessly invaded and occupied Poland.

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There are many narratives, and each one is rooted in personal or collective experience. The shape of the Holocaust story creates a set of possibilities for passing on that experience, giving sense to it, rooting it in tradition and creating a grounding for the future. There are many strategies for understanding aspects of the past which are still an important presence in our here and now.

The Polish public discourse surrounding the Holocaust can be perceived as a mirror in which the Poles view themselves as a national community. Instead of carrying on endless quarrels about 'who did what', it would surely be more fruitful to consider how to talk about the history of the Holocaust today. For this narrative is testimony to our understanding of the past.

There is no doubt that we must talk freely and openly about both the positive and the negative aspects of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. This is absolutely vital. We have to respect the plain facts and the historical truth, and face up to every dimension of the Holocaust experience. History is never black and white. We must acknowledge this if we want to develop into a truly mature society.