

Commemorating in Place

Reflections on the Meaning and Experience of Holocaust Tourism

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ABSTRACT: What makes historical tourism so compelling? The author reflects upon her personal experience of Holocaust tourism to tease out its meaning and appeal. The paper considers the making of meaning through the in-situ experience, including through association, sensory perception, and imagination. The paradigm of dark tourism, traditionally associated with superficial consumption, is dismissed as being too naive a rendering of the visitor experience. Instead, the author commends the tourist's inherent capacity to make connections between the past and the present, and thereby generate meaning. Ultimately, however, the author finds her most authentic response to "being there" is one of commemoration, since she knows that what she is visiting in the present is not history itself, but merely a memory of it.

KEY WORDS: historical tourism, Holocaust, dark tourism, historical meaning, commemoration

Growing up in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, Australia, the prattle of European accents was a frequent feature of our sidewalks and dining tables. My grandparents, and most of the grandparents I knew, spoke a broken and heavily accented English, the intonations of which filled me with a deep sense of comfort but also signified an obstacle to our shared identity—a distance in our common understanding which I sensed was somehow difficult to overcome. The gap was not, I suspect, one of language or literal understanding, for the English they spoke was an utterly sufficient form of communication. Rather, the disconnect I felt was one of vastly different experience, for my grandparents and their friends had come from Europe as refugees—Jews who had survived the Holocaust and made Australia their new home.

My grandmother, who herself had been a witness to hell and history in Auschwitz, often extolled the virtues of her "lucky country" and applauded its inordinate distance from Europe. For her, and for many like her, the territorial expanse between her old and new life implied a protective shield and the best chance of starting anew in a place that was literally and figuratively a world away from her old

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 29–42 (February 2024). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2024 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2024.46.1.29>.

one. She had left Europe behind, and would never once fathom even the possibility of a return visit. I recall her sentiment echoed by many members of our community—survivors and their descendants who insisted, defiantly, that they would never buy a German car, never step foot in Germany nor give their tourist dollars to Poland¹—a country whose territory was oft likened to that of a Jewish graveyard. Yet as time passed, Jews did make trips to these places, overcoming their discomfort to travel to the lands where so many of their relatives had suffered and died.

I embarked on just such a trip in May 2017, when I joined a tour organized by the Sydney Jewish Museum. As a result perhaps of my third-generation survivor status, I was sufficiently removed from the trauma by the passage of time such that I had none of the reservations about visiting these countries that had been expressed by so many of my predecessors. Instead, I was yearning to go. I had been in awe of my grandparents' lived experience of the Holocaust since I was a child, but in 2014, I had become a volunteer guide of the museum's permanent Holocaust exhibition and my investment in Holocaust history was becoming more and more intellectual. I wanted to know the history better, and I suspected there was knowledge to be uncovered and meaning to be made by being present in the landscape of that history. My expectation was hardly unfounded since tourists have long been attracted to sites of historical significance.² Yet if I was to become, by necessity and like any other visitor, a tourist to these sites of atrocity, what moral, historical, and personal implications might arise? What meaning might I uncover, and how might my status as a tourist influence the making of that meaning? Moreover, I wondered, how would I *feel* being in physical proximity to the places where my forebears had suffered? Given my intimate relationship to the history I was to encounter, I anticipated a deeply personal and emotional experience, but would "being there" bring me closer to what my grandparents had known? Would it traverse the distance I had always sensed in my connection to them?

In his *Essay on Sepulchres*, William Godwin argues in favor of history as a place "to be visited." He writes:

I never understood the annals of chivalry so well as when I walked among the ruins of Kenilworth Castle. I no longer trusted to the tale of the historian, the cold and uncertain record of words. . . . The subtle, the audacious and murder-dealing Leicester stood before me. I heard the trampling of horses, and the clangour of trumpets.³

1 For support of my anecdotal recollections that animosity towards a country impacts a person's decision to buy from or visit such country see Villy Abraham, Abraham Pizam, and Marcos Medeiros, "The Impact of Attitudes, Motivational Factors, and Emotions on the Image of a Dark Tourism Site and the Desire of the Victims' Descendants to Visit It," *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 17, no. 3 (2022): 267–68.

2 Duncan Light, "Heritage & Tourism" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, ed. E. Waterton and S. Watson (London: Palgrave MacMillan UK, 2015), 144–45.

3 Mark Phil, Pamela Celmit, Martin Fitzpatrick, and William St. Clair, *The Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, vol 6 (New York: Routledge, 2020).

Here Godwin is experiencing a sense of historical embodiment derived from the remnants of history found within the landscape. This is an associative exercise, whereby a site's significance is only revealed when one attaches or associates prior knowledge to it.⁴ It is also, as Mark Salber Phillips suggests, a highly affective process, whereby the knowledge of what happened there “strongly seizes upon the imagination” and imbues the scene with emotional significance.⁵

Godwin appears to have anticipated the inherent appeal of historical tourism whereby travelers are lured by the promise of a physical encounter with history, to “see for themselves” and “imagine what it was like.” Of course, one can never actually inhabit history. Any such physical encounter is necessarily mediated by the remnants, representations, and interactions experienced by the tourist in the present, by their imaginative and emotional responses, and by the associations they draw upon. It is this process that pulls the tourist into proximity with history, and generates meaning from it.

This associative process became evident to me the moment I entered Poland. I travelled by train and recall that the initial sight of train tracks on Polish territory distressed me—these were the tracks that took Jewish victims to their deaths. In Warsaw, I commented in my journal that “the place is itchy, uncomfortable, weighted.”⁶ Surely this has nothing to do with Warsaw's landscape, which reflects an old-European allure, but can only be about my negative associations with what happened there. At the site of the former Nazi Extermination Camp Treblinka (now the Treblinka Museum), the interplay between place, association, and meaning becomes even more stark. Treblinka's notoriously successful genocidal campaign saw the murder of an estimated 840,000 Jews there, yet today, nothing of the old camp remains. Upon arrival, we ventured out into the landscape where the camp once stood, along a path to the right of which ran slabs of concrete, imitating the train tracks that once lay there. My knowledge about Nazi transport methods imbued those slabs with meaning. The pathway opened up to a large field, scattered with hundreds of memorial stones of varying size—they looked like grave markers, and indeed they were, for I knew I now stood at one of world's largest gravesites. Without this knowledge of where I stood and what had been done there, the landscape was unremarkable. Yet, through a process of association, I felt myself closer to history. Even as I write now about my memories of Treblinka, I feel the immensity of what transpired there.

I had anticipated that my physical presence at Holocaust-related sites would increase my historical understanding, and certainly there exist phenomenological

4 Paul Williams as referenced in Joy Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts: Tourists in the Memoriscapes of September 11* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 160.

5 Mark Salber Phillips, “William Godwin and the Idea of Commemoration,” in *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain 1740–1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 329.

6 Author's Personal Travelling Journal, entry from May 25, 2017, original held by author, Kensington, NSW.

theories which recognize the ways in which sensory perception of space produces knowledge.⁷ This was certainly the case when I entered the gas chambers at the former Nazi Concentration Camp Majdanek, which were unexpectedly small, and which even in their cleansed state, struck me as breathless. At the former Nazi Concentration Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, the residue of dusty roads, railway tracks, barbed wire, and rows of barracks spoke of a vast landscape of terror. Most notably, I gained significant spatial knowledge of history when I stood before a remnant of the Warsaw Ghetto Wall. I learned, for example, by standing physically before the wall, that it was not so high. Then a resident of a neighboring apartment leaned out her window and “shushed” us. She was annoyed by our presence. This led me to understand, with spatial clarity, that the ghetto wall had literally abutted the homes of non-Jewish Poles. I now grasped the extent to which they had been eyewitnesses to Jewish ghettoization—neighbors would have smelled the appalling conditions, heard the cries of hungry children, seen the dying bodies. The reality of Jewish suffering would have been stark.

Rowland Weston accounts for the compulsion to “tread [the] earth and breathe [the] air” where history happened as driven by the empathetic experience of historical tourism, generated when we imagine history to be “a material realm experienced by embodied individuals like ourselves.”⁸ Here history becomes a primarily affective discipline, one which inspires compassion and facilitates ethical considerations. There was one moment during my tour when I felt this most acutely. I was visiting the former Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, which, unlike Treblinka, still stands, and had entered the toilet block there. Rows upon rows of holes cut into benches. My mind immediately conjured an imagining of my grandmother humiliated by that toilet block. She had been there, and the sight of those toilets somehow connected me, viscerally and with the deepest of empathy, to her suffering. It was a momentary, but deeply shocking, feeling. It was also a discrete moment for at no other time in my travels was I able to “imagine what it was like.” At Auschwitz, I had tried to imagine what it might have been like when my grandmother caught a glimpse of her sister across a barbed-wire fence. At the women’s barracks there, I had tried to imagine what it might have been like when my grandmother heard the cries of children in the gas chambers, calling for their mothers in so many languages. At the selection platform, I had tried to imagine what it might have been like to stumble from the darkness of an overstuffed cattle wagon into hell.

Yet each time I tried to imagine, I faltered. No wonder, for as Elie Wiesel famously proclaimed, “Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know.”⁹ I myself was acutely sensitive to this distinction, as my contemporaneous journal notes reveal: “Being here is not ‘hard.’ It is heavy, for

⁷ Daniel P. Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz: Holocaust Tourism and the Meaning of Remembrance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 34 and 63.

⁸ Rowland Weston, “Being There and Being Then: Ideal Presence and Historical Tourism,” *New Zealand Journal of Public History* 1, no. 1 (December 2011): 91.

⁹ Quoted in Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz*, 58.

sure, but Nana had it ‘hard’ in Auschwitz, not me.”¹⁰ I was a tourist there and would shortly leave on an air-conditioned bus. It was apparent that the place I was visiting was not Auschwitz-Birkenau, but merely a representation of it, and while the visit brings me closer to my grandmother’s experiences, it simultaneously reinforces how far away they are.

Of course, not every visitor seeks a personified experience of the Holocaust. Rather, tourists visit for any number and combination of reasons; they may go to learn something new or see for themselves, for the purpose of memorialization, genealogical discovery, or to fulfil a so-called bucket-list. Their visit may be incidental to a broader travel experience or motivated by the lure of morbid fascination, the latter a feature often attributed to dark tourism. Dark tourism refers broadly to the attraction of sites related to death and suffering.¹¹ This may include gravesites or death-sites of celebrated personalities, sites associated with infamous crimes or criminals, battlefields, landscapes of natural or man-made disaster, and sites of genocide. Traditionally, commentators have associated dark tourism with the macabre and voyeuristic, and have dismissed the motivations of dark tourists as superficial.¹² Similarly, the behavior of these tourists is interpreted as problematic; as anthropologist Joy Sather-Wagstaff writes, “at best, tourists are represented as passive spectators . . . at worst, as destructive consumers.”¹³ This may, in part, be a definitional problem, since, as a broadly defined collective, the varying sites of dark tourism appear inappropriate bedfellows.

In any event, the popularity of dark tourism persists, and in the context of atrocity history in particular, continues to raise ethical concerns about tourist motivation and behavior, and the impact of commercialization on the authentic rendering of history.¹⁴ As Sather-Wagstaff explains, public and scholarly discourses have typically constructed tourism as a form of economic exchange which trivializes the significance of what occurred at the visited site.¹⁵ Historian Tim Cole has even likened the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum, which manages the site of the former Nazi camp, to a “Holocaust theme park” due to the tourist amenities there.¹⁶ Furthermore, tourists to such sites are accused of being “passive onlookers uncritically consuming prepared spectacles of history,” and a degree of impropriety

¹⁰ Author’s Travelling Journal, May 30, 2017.

¹¹ Richard Sharpley, “Shedding Light on Dark Tourism: An Introduction,” in *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*, ed. Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone (Bristol, UK: Channel View Publications, 2009), 10.

¹² Sharpley, “Shedding Light,” 17.

¹³ Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 73.

¹⁴ As to the popularity of dark tourism, see Sharpley, “Shedding Light,” 9; see also, Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, “2 million 230 thousand visitors at the Auschwitz Memorial in 2019,” January 7, 2020, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/2-million-320-thousand-visitors-at-the-auschwitz-memorial-in-2019.1400.html>.

¹⁵ Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 78–80; see also Philip R. Stone, “Dark Tourism: Morality and New Moral Spaces,” in Sharpley and Stone, *The Darker Side of Travel*, 58.

¹⁶ As referred to by Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 78.

is almost expected.¹⁷ Yet even with the best of intentions and behavior, all visitors will, like I did, necessarily behave like tourists—they will arrive noisily, apply sunscreen, consume food, and use the amenities. They will take photos and may even buy a memento to savor the memory of their visit. Additionally, in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, they will come in droves—two million visitors each year—and indeed, the entrance to the site teams with busloads of them.¹⁸

At sites where mass atrocity occurred, and particularly where human remains still lie, such touristic behaviors can be jarring, and certainly there exists a risk of moral impropriety at the juxtaposition between tourism and atrocity history. Yet to suggest that tourists are only ever superficially engaged, or that they realize a voyeuristic “thrill” from visiting, is reductive and unimaginative. I myself was encouraged by the throngs of visitors I encountered at Auschwitz—I was glad to see them come! “Let them learn,” I reasoned, “let them remember.” They did not disturb my peace nor the peace of my ancestors, and I had no qualms with their touristic behaviors. Furthermore, the tourists I encountered seemed to have no difficulty appreciating the solemnity of their visit. As Sather-Wagstaff maintains, the Disneyfication argument reduces touristic experience to frivolous entertainment, and privileges cognitive knowledge over experiential knowledge.¹⁹ This denies the reality that most atrocity tourists do engage with history in meaningful ways, and that consumption need not erase authenticity.²⁰ Indeed, I would argue that it is the tourist experience itself—the very act of “being there”—that prompts engagement and involves the tourist in an active process of meaning-making. Daniel Reynolds uses a postcard metaphor to elucidate this point. The postcard, he argues, is at first glance a clichéd symbol of touristic consumption, yet on the flipside, postcards “invite travellers to inscribe their own commentary.”²¹ Moreover, such touristic behaviors—particularly the taking of photographs—both evidence their engagement, and also support visitors to continue to make *and share* meaning long after they have left the site on their tourist buses. It follows that the interactions and experiences at sites of Holocaust history hardly trivialize or disrespect the gravity of what happened there. Rather, visitors are part of a complex process of consumption and meaning-making which elucidates and reframes our understanding of, and relationship to, history.

Indeed, it is at the nexus between history and tourism that I stumbled upon some of the most compelling aspects of my trip. This is because the way in which we, as tourists, engaged with the sites, and how the host countries presented them and interacted with us, provided an opportunity to explore not just the complex history of the Holocaust, but also its relevance in contemporary settings. At Berlin’s Jewish Museum, for example, I witnessed teenagers playing hide and seek amongst

¹⁷ Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 78–79.

¹⁸ Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, “2 million 230 thousand visitors.”

¹⁹ Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 81, 86.

²⁰ Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 7, 86.

²¹ Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz*, 2.

the pillars in the Garden of Exile. Was it impropriety or did they not understand what they were being asked to remember there? Or were they just teens releasing energy after trudging through a history museum? For me, the juxtaposition of the playful boys with the painful history of Jewish Berlin (represented by the Garden) pleased me—reinforcing my understanding that history must collide with the present to have any meaning. Near the village of Tykocin in Poland, we walked a path through the mesmerizing, pale green trees of the Lopuchowo Forest to come upon the massacre site and graveyard of Tykocin’s Jews, who were murdered there by the Nazis in 1941. We were clearly not the first to visit, for we found the space strewn with impromptu commemoratives—small stones (a traditional Jewish bereavement practice), hand-made plaques, and Israeli flags. To me, it resembled a garbage site. Here the messy evidence of visitation reflects the ways in which tourists personalize their experiences at such sites, and in doing so, reinforce, generate, and contest historical meaning. These “folk assemblages” are also a device through which tourists leave their mark, a form of graffiti that enables a “conversation between visitors over time.”²² This “duality of listening to the past and the present,” which seems to me an inherent aspect of historical tourism, thereby facilitates history-making.²³ So despite my discontent with the aesthetic at Lopuchowo, I am reminded that a memorial is meaningless if not visited, and that meaning in such spaces is made and re-made through the active process of visitation.

My touristic experience also offered insight into contemporary German and Polish views about Holocaust history, for “no narrative of history is ever . . . separable from politicized domains.”²⁴ In Berlin, the city’s numerous memorials imply a strong sense of acknowledgment of, and responsibility for, the nation’s past. One finds the city strewn with them—the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe spans an entire mid-city block, the Tiergarten houses memorials to the murdered Sinti Roma and the persecuted homosexuals, plaques on apartment blocks name murdered Jews who once lived there, and brass stepping stones paved into the footpaths mean pedestrians literally tread on memorials when walking the streets. I even saw bus-stops promoting remembrance of the crimes of Adolf Eichmann. The Jewish visitor to the city, then, feels entirely satisfied, if not quietly impressed, by the extent to which the Germans appear to have reconciled with their criminal past. Later, I discovered that the German government has indeed made a concerted effort to appeal to Jewish travelers, and also that the Berlin memorials are widely considered to offer concrete evidence of Germany’s moral restoration.²⁵ The

22 Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 170 and 197.

23 Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz*, 66.

24 Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 160; see also Sarah K. Lischer, “Narrating Atrocity: Genocide Memorials, Dark Tourism, and the Politics of Memory,” *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (December 2019): 805–6.

25 Anne M. Blankenship, “Jewish Tourism in Berlin and Germany’s Public Repentance for the Holocaust,” *Academia Turistica* 11, no. 2 (2018): 118–20; Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz*, 125 and 153.

bus-stop promotion, I now realize, was in English, and so presumably a form of propaganda aimed at tourists. Nonetheless, as a Jew it feels okay to be there, good even, since the German narrative appears well-aligned with the Jewish one. My subjective experience and response in this regard is supported by recent research which concludes that Jewish visitors to Germany attribute their many Holocaust memorials to a “coordinated display of national guilt and repentance” which has directly contributed to the reconciliation process.²⁶

Furthermore, it seems, this strong sense of German national consciousness and atonement regarding their Nazi past extends far beyond an effort to satisfy Jewish tourists. As Susan Neiman argues in *Learning from the Germans*, despite tenuous beginnings, the German people have, since the early 1980s, “worked, slowly and fitfully, to acknowledge the evils their nation committed.”²⁷ There is even a German word for it—*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*—“working-off-the-past.”²⁸ As Neiman points out, “Working off Germany’s criminal past was not an academic exercise; it was too intimate for that. It meant confronting parents and teachers and calling their authority rotten.”²⁹ Neiman argues that Germany’s reflective approach to its own history has engendered a nation committed to the defense of pluralism and, as her book title suggests, other nations may take valuable lessons from their efforts. Of course, antisemitism and racism continue to exist in Germany, like anywhere else, but what impresses Neiman is Germany’s “swift, sharp and serious” condemnation of it.³⁰ Germany, it seems, in direct contrast to its past and perhaps because of it, has become “one of the safest countries for Jews in the world.”³¹ No wonder therefore that my subjective response to visiting Berlin as a Jewish tourist was one of general satisfaction with their historical reckoning.

In contrast, upon entering Poland, my tour group and I felt a common unease. Although Berlin was the regime’s epicenter, it was in Poland that the machinery of murder had operated. Germany, we felt, had made vast inroads to amend for its sins. Poland, meanwhile, continued to engage in a historiographical battle over its complicity in the crimes of Nazi Germany and its relationship with Jews during and after the Holocaust. Polish historiography in this regard has been complex.³² Undoubtedly, the Polish nation had been a victim of German aggression in World War II, but during the Communist era, the historical interpretation which prevailed collapsed Polish victimhood into a singular category of suffering at the hands of

26 Blankenship, “Jewish Tourism,” 125.

27 Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019): 25.

28 Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, 8.

29 Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, 8.

30 Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, 13.

31 Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, 59.

32 Kornelia Kończal, “Politics of Innocence: Holocaust Memory in Poland,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (April 2022): 252; Joanna Beata Michlic, “At the Crossroads: Jedwabne and Polish Historiography of the Holocaust,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 3 (2016): 296.

capitalist fascism.³³ This narrative denied the unique circumstances of Polish Jewry during the war, and instead emphasized Polish/Jewish solidarity and Polish heroism.³⁴ It rarely encompassed any consideration of Polish antisemitism or collusion during the Holocaust.

This changed following the fall of communism, and the subsequent publication, in 2000, of Jan Gross's *Neighbors*, which exposed the 1941 massacre of Jews from Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors. A new phase of Polish "critical patriotism" ensued, which saw a significant reassessment by Polish historians of Polish/Jewish relations during the Holocaust, which in turn revealed many well-researched instances of Polish complicity.³⁵ Unfortunately, argues Kornelia Kończal, the influence of critical patriotism on popular perception remained limited, as evidenced by multiple studies suggesting the enduring strength of the innocent victim/hero trope.³⁶ More recently, the Polish government, led by the conservative, right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS), has instituted a politics of memory designed to strengthen Polish national pride by rejecting critical patriotism as a "pedagogy of shame."³⁷ This has taken various forms, including a massive public history campaign emphasizing the Polish "righteous" who saved Jews during the Holocaust, as well as what many critics consider to be a general whitewashing of the many acts of betrayal and antisemitism enacted by non-Jewish Poles against their Jewish counterparts during and immediately following the Holocaust.³⁸ Indeed, only a year after our visit, the Polish government made it a crime to claim Polish complicity in the crimes of Nazi Germany, and the PiS continues to enforce a singular approach to Holocaust memory in Poland.³⁹

Against this backdrop, and despite encountering many excellent museums and memorial sites during our time in Poland, my tour group and I were less inclined to appreciate Polish attempts at commemoration. Rather we were cynical, and alert to signs of impenitence and indifference. When, for example, the Polish neighbor at the Warsaw Ghetto Wall expressed her frustration at our presence there, we were disposed to credit her action as a sign of disrespect, and moreover as a reflection of

33 Kornelia Kończal, "Mnemonic Populism: The Polish Holocaust Law and its Afterlife," *European Review* 29, no. 4 (August 2021): 458; Geneviève Zubrzycki, "The Politics of Jewish Absence in Contemporary Poland," *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 2 (April 2017): 254–55.

34 Kończal, "Politics of Innocence," 256; Michlic, "At the Crossroads," 296.

35 Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik, "Beyond 'Making Poland Great Again': Nostalgia in Polish Populist and Non-populist Discourses," *Sociological Forum* 37, no. 51 (December 2022): 1377; Michlic, "At the Crossroads," 296–99; Zubrzycki, "The Politics of Jewish Absence," 256–57.

36 Kończal, "Mnemonic Populism," 460–61; Kończal, "Politics of Innocence," 251.

37 Michlic, "At the Crossroads," 299–301.

38 Jenni Frazer, "A Polish Govt Institute Honors Poles Who Saved Jews. Scholars Say It's Whitewash," *The Times of Israel*, July 10, 2020; Kończal, "Mnemonic Populism," 465; Michlic, "At the Crossroads," 305.

39 Uladzislau Belavusau, "The Rise of Memory Laws in Poland: An Adequate Tool to Counter Historical Disinformation?," *Security and Human Rights* 29, no. 1–4 (2018): 36–54; see also "Poland Holocaust Law: Government U-turn on Jail Threat," *BBC News* online edition, June 27, 2018, which reports that the law was subsequently downgraded to a civil offense; Kończal, "Mnemonic Populism," 457–58; Michlic, "At the Crossroads," 305.

contemporary Polish attitudes towards Jews and the Holocaust. In Tykocin, where a striking seventeenth-century synagogue still stands, we encountered an old man carving an ornamental figure from pinewood—a representation of a shtetl-era Jew, a memento for tourists. “Shloshim” he tells us. “Shloshim” is a Hebrew word meaning “thirty.” He is quoting the price. Except he is a sham—for there are no Jews left in Tykocin and his little effigy holds coins in the palm of his hand, a reference to an age-old antisemitic trope.

Following my return to Australia, I learn something new about that piece of Ghetto Wall we visited from Reynolds’s writings on Holocaust tourism. When Reynolds himself visited the spot, he had chanced upon another neighbor, a man named Jedruszczak, who, it turns out, had worked untiringly to ensure that fragment of the ghetto wall near his home was preserved.⁴⁰ Here was a chance encounter with a neighbor very different from mine, and it reminds me of the nuanced nature of history, tourism, and people.

In his travels through Mexico, Weston found that his “historical imagination was more provoked by twenty-first century Mexico than by any physical remnants of Mexico’s past.”⁴¹ He felt, for example, the “calamity of colonisation” most vividly expressed in the poverty and racism he encountered there.⁴² Likewise, in Poland, I found the calamity of the Holocaust most apparent in the stark absence of a Polish–Jewish community. Surprisingly, I felt this absence signified by the mammoth physical presence of Warsaw’s POLIN Museum. Opened in 2005, POLIN presents the thousand-year history of Jewish life in Polish lands. On the one hand, it stands as evidence of growing recognition, by the Polish nation, of the significant presence of Jewish life in prewar Poland. Yet to me, it paradoxically towers like a massive hole—the Polish history it tells no longer has a modern-day presence there.

In the former Jewish Quarter of Kraków–Kazimierz, the hole looms even larger. Kraków is nearby the town of Oswiecim, where the former Auschwitz Concentration Camps were situated, and here the tourist industry has re-created a Jewish environment which reeks of contrived inauthenticity. When we visit, Kazimierz features purportedly Jewish restaurants, souvenir stalls and Klezmer-style buskers—yet as a member of our tour group points out, mezuzahs, a traditional symbol of Jewish inhabitancy, are conspicuously absent from doorposts of the buildings there. In Kazimierz, the marketability of Holocaust tourism produces a fundamental irony as to “how to restore a Jewish settlement without Jewish inhabitants.”⁴³ It also raises questions about the interplay between tourism, history, politics, and place identity, and who should “own, preserve, interpret and manage, in whose interest, such heritage.”⁴⁴ At the Galicia Jewish Museum, also in Kraków, the permanent

40 Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz*, 122.

41 Weston, “Being There and Being Then,” 87.

42 Weston, “Being There and Being Then,” 87.

43 G. J. Ashworth, “Holocaust Tourism: The Experience of Krakow-Kazimierz,” *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* 11, no. 4 (December 2002): 366.

44 Ashworth, “Holocaust Tourism,” 367.

photographic exhibition documents the remnants of Jewish heritage in Poland. I find the most memorable depicts the impression of a mezuzah on a doorpost—the mezuzah has long since been removed, but the paint which once surrounded it has faded and leaves a lasting shadow. The absence is palpable.

Small changes are also happening in Kazimierz. We meet the director of Kraków's Jewish Community Centre (JCC), where a growing cluster of Jews and non-Jews are rekindling Jewish community there. The Jews are typically Poles who have discovered their Jewish ancestry, and the non-Jews are Poles who are invested, perhaps as a form of atonement, in supporting the revival of what was once a significant aspect of Polish heritage. This, it turns out, is hardly a singular occurrence in contemporary Poland, which has experienced a resurgence of interest in commemorating its Jewish past. The POLIN Museum is, presumably, a substantial example of Poland's "Jewish revival," but the turn is also demonstrable in a range of other exhibits, monuments, commemorative spaces, festivals, art projects, and food experiences which have taken place throughout Poland since 2006.⁴⁵ The Jewish revival, explains Geneviève Zubrzycki, is "part of an attempt by progressive Poles to secularize Polishness" in a country where national identity is inextricably linked to Catholic heritage.⁴⁶ This seems a more plausible explanation for non-Jewish involvement in the JCC than my conjecture that these non-Jewish Poles might be engaging in some form of expiation, although certainly some might be.

Despite the JCC's efforts, the Jewish population of Poland remains miniscule, and so the broader revival movement, composed predominantly as it must be of non-Jews, celebrates Poland's Jewish heritage but inherently also draws attention to Jewish nonpresence. As Zubrzycki argues, this creates a "dialectic between absence and the mnemonic reinvention of presence" which in my experience felt both affirming and at the same time uncomfortable.⁴⁷ Zubrzycki acknowledges various modes of absence which helps to make sense of the duality of my own experience. First, she refers to "objective" absence as that which is "simply not there."⁴⁸ In Poland, I am intensely cognizant of the objective absence of Jews in the country, but more so, I am aware of the significance of that absence. In particular, I know that millions of Jews were once there, and why they are no longer. No wonder the POLIN Museum looms in my experience like a huge void. As Zubrzycki explains, "absence in this historical-temporal sense emphasizes the traumatic assuage of one state (presence) to another (absence)."⁴⁹ Yet at the same time, POLIN represents a significant shift between what Zubrzycki calls "discursive absence," which is shaped by "omission and silence," and "phenomenological absence," "whereby the absence of Jews is actively experienced as a loss."⁵⁰ It is clear the Jewish revival

45 Rhys H. Williams et al., "Review Symposium," *Sociology of Religion* 84, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 231.

46 Williams et al., "Review Symposium," 230.

47 Zubrzycki, "The Politics of Jewish Absence," 251.

48 Zubrzycki, "The Politics of Jewish Absence," 251.

49 Zubrzycki, "The Politics of Jewish Absence," 251.

50 Zubrzycki, "The Politics of Jewish Absence," 251–52.

has commenced a signposting of Jewish absence which has contributed to greater historical awareness and a growing respect for Jewish culture and contribution, yet at the same time, it risks “crude cultural appropriation” such as that which I saw in Tykocin.⁵¹ The growth of a Jewish population in Kraków thus feels confrontational—is it, as the JCC’s director contends, a “living monument to Jewish resilience” or an affront to the people murdered there?⁵² Without a Jewish presence in Poland, it seems the country may be destined to only face its Jewish history by way of nostalgic representation, and through its interactions with Holocaust tourism.

In places where genocide happened, one is confronted with gaping holes such as those I found in Poland. “In the vacuum created in such a place,” argues Reynolds, “we erect a substitute—a culture of memorialization.”⁵³ This is both a process of, and response to, the history that is told there. In Poland, it had become apparent to me that today’s Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum was not at all where my grandmother had been, although the knowledge of my proximity, in physical space, to the location of her Holocaust experience moved me deeply. Yet with utmost certainty, what I knew Auschwitz to be was a gravesite, and I found it an instinctual response to mourn there. Standing in the places where history had inflicted such profound loss and suffering, I found contemplation and commemoration to be my most authentic response. I contemplated the pain, the terror and the loss of life, I honored the victims, I paid my respects. There is a photograph of me at the conclusion of our tour of Majdanek. The tour there had ended, dramatically, at a large memorial within which is gathered the ashes of Jews whose murdered bodies were burned there. Steps lead up to the cauldron-shaped structure. The photograph captures me sitting on those steps, my eyes are red, my face drained of color—indeed, for quite some time, my fellow travelers and I sat apart on those steps and did not speak—a deeply personal and internalized remembrance, emotional at its core, and without thought. I had embarked on a Holocaust tour with the expectation that my historical comprehension would increase as a result of having “been there.” Yet, as it turned out, I found my most authentic experience to be one of contemplation and commemoration. Here then, was the true appeal of touring the Holocaust for me.

This response was undoubtedly influenced by my status as a survivor descendant, an identity I held in common with most of my travelling companions. However, as Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward point out in their analysis of Australian pilgrimages to Gallipoli, our profound emotional response was likely not “discovered ‘on site.’”⁵⁴ Rather, much of the response we felt *in situ* related to the

51 Geneviève Zubrzycki as quoted in Williams et al., “Review Symposium,” 227.

52 As quoted by Yardena Schwartz in “40 Miles from Auschwitz, Poland’s Jewish Community is Beginning to Thrive,” *TIME*, February 27, 2019.

53 Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz*, 10.

54 Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, “‘It Was Really Moving, Mate’: The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia,” *Australian Historical Studies* 129 (2007): 141.

knowledge and memories we brought with us from home, and then inscribed to place.⁵⁵ As Paul Williams explains, tourists visit historical sites with a pre-conceived “sense of history . . . personal conscience then becomes the reference point for an (often internal) dialogue with what we physically encounter.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, my intuitively commemorative response to these sites was reinforced by the collective recitation of Kaddish, the Jewish memorial prayer, at almost every site we visited. Together we took time to remember the dead and pay our respects. This was an activity planned by the tour organizers, and embraced by my fellow travelers. We also began, impromptu, to share our personal Holocaust-heritage stories during long bus rides. In this way, we drew on our individual and communal memories to develop a shared and sacred experience of remembrance, and each site we visited occasioned an opportunity for ritual mourning which was simultaneously both deeply personal and collaborative. Weston suggests that historical tourism is more an activity of heritage than of history—like a pilgrimage to a sacred site—and that indeed, was my experience.⁵⁷

Standing amongst the dead in Treblinka, I had posed a question to myself which my journal records, “Do I just sit and contemplate, or do I try to imagine and reconstruct?”⁵⁸ It is clear that no amount of reading, listening, or travelling can reconcile the present with the actual experience of history. One may be able to hear the “trampling of horses, and the clangour of trumpets” but the sound will always be muffled and one will never truly know how it feels to ride the beast. As Gary Weissman points out, “no degree of power or monumentality can transform one person’s lived memories into another’s.”⁵⁹ Instead, one draws upon a composite of historical content, commentary, emotion, imagination and one’s own lived experience to create historical knowledge—a form of memory “which in a strict sense, is not memory at all, but remembrance.”⁶⁰ At Treblinka, stunned as I was by the profoundly moving impact of being in physical proximity to the landscape where the Holocaust had happened, my answer had been immediate and instinctive—“This seems to me a place of memorial, of reflection and emotion.”⁶¹ My historical tour collated all these elements of historical knowledge, and intermingled them “with the scenery to produce a kind of sanctity of space,” which found its proper conclusion in commemoration.⁶² I suspect this may indeed be what the business of historical tourism is all about.

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55 McKenna and Ward, “It Was Really Moving, Mate,” 145; Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146.

56 Quoted by Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage that Hurts*, 160.

57 Weston, “Being There and Being Then,” 89–91.

58 Author’s Travelling Journal, May 26, 2017.

59 Reynolds, *Postcards*, 60.

60 Reynolds, *Postcards*, 60; see also Tony Walter, “Dark Tourism: Mediating Between the Dead and the Living,” in Sharpley and Stone, *The Darker Side of Travel*, 54.

61 Author’s Travelling Journal, 26 May 26, 2017.

62 Salber Philips, “William Godwin,” 320.

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