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## ***Remembering and Belonging: Jewish Heritage and Civic Agency in Poland's Haunted Urban Spaces<sup>1</sup>***

Hana Cervinkova  
(Maynooth University)  
[hana.cervinkova@mu.ie](mailto:hana.cervinkova@mu.ie)

Juliet D. Golden  
(Syracuse Abroad, Central Europe Program)  
[jdg102@caa.columbia.edu](mailto:jdg102@caa.columbia.edu)

In the context of Poland's recent illiberal turn, large cities have been important stages where the fault lines of the national imaginary that run through Polish society have become apparent. In this article, based on ethnographic research in the Polish city of Wrocław, we focus on individual cultural agents who have engaged with the marginalised Jewish heritage of the city in constructing diverse imaginaries of urban belonging. Their work, carried out against the backdrop of exclusionary nationalist agenda of the Polish state, illuminates the power of human agency to harness cultural heritage as a social and political resource for the present. We show how through their urban-based practices, these cultural agents challenge the Polish hegemonic heritage discourses that exclude the Other from the national imaginary.

**Keywords:** Jewish heritage, urban space, identity, belonging, civic agency, Breslau, Wrocław, Poland.

### **Introduction**

In this article, we focus on civic agency of individuals in contemporary urban Poland, who through their practices engage in the production of diverse urban imaginaries. Our ethnographic study draws on interviews and observations of people and institutions that specifically build their activity on sites of or in reference to the Jewish heritage of the city of Wrocław. Their work in education, the arts and historic preservation is deeply embedded in the post-Holocaust urban spaces of a Central European city largely devoid of Jewish residents. We are interested in how through their heritage practices they have counteracted the reactive historical policies of the Polish state, which have suppressed and silenced social, political and cultural diversity (Cervinkova 2016, Snyder 2016).

### **Politics of Historical Memory in Poland**

It is important to underscore that in centring Jewish urban heritage, our actors are transgressing the very sensitive terrain of Poland's national imaginary, in which Jews have always occupied the position of the 'threatening Other' (Michlic 2006). Anti-Jewish prejudices which have permeated most of the Polish state-building project since 1880, surface with increased intensity in critical turning points in Polish history, such as the reemergence of the independent Polish state after 1918, in the interwar period, during the Nazi Occupation post-1939, and in the postwar communist era (post-1945), culminating in the expulsion of the remaining Polish

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citizens of Jewish origin in 1968. Currently, Poland is experiencing a political turn toward populist nationalism, a project, which again hinges on particular interpretations of the past of the Polish nation (Bucholc and Komornik 2019, Hinsey 2016, Michlic and Melchior 2013, Piotrowski 2016). Since the populist Law and Justice party won the parliamentary elections in 2015, the Polish state has institutionalised, through legislation and cultural policies, historical denialism (Bucholc and Komornik 2019, Grabowski 2016, Snyder 2016), bringing to a halt the process of national soul-searching over the past that had gathered momentum in the early 2000s following the publication of *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross (Gross 2001, Michlic 2006). Gross's probing study shed light on the mass murder of the Jews of Jedwabne at the hands of Polish compatriots during the Nazi-occupation (Michlic and Melchior 2013, Gross 2001, Zubrzycki 2016). Under Law and Justice party rule, museum projects, such as the sophisticatedly conceived WWII Museum in Gdansk are being remodeled to 'enshrine Polish innocence' and fit 'the Polish point of view' (Snyder 2016). Polin, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which was awarded with the title of the European Museum of the Year in 2016, has also been under pressure for its critical examination of recent Polish past. Most recently, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage refused to fund a temporary exhibition and affiliated events devoted to the 50th anniversary of the 1968 anti-Semitic campaigns (Cohen 2019).

The centrality of suppressing the memory of the Holocaust and Polish participation in the destruction of the Polish Jewish community came to full force when legislators voted in a law that would impose sanctions of up to three years of imprisonment onto anyone who attributed 'responsibility or co-responsibility to the Polish nation or state for crimes committed by the German Third Reich' (Belavusau and Wójcik 2018). This law was a direct attempt at legalizing Holocaust denial and resulted in diplomatic conflicts with Poland's international allies, finally forcing the Polish authorities to withdraw criminal penalisation from the amendment (Polish Press Agency 2018). Nevertheless, the historical policies continue to figure prominently in the authoritarian agenda of the Polish state. Through the legislature, and state-controlled media and public schools, it focuses on mobilizing nationalist sentiments by means of historical revisionism, which stresses Polish victimhood and courageous resistance, erasing the pertinence of considering the historical suffering of ethnic and religious minorities in the hands of occupiers and Polish compatriots.

In the context of this authoritarian and nationalist turn fueled by official historical narratives, large cities play an important and complex role. On the one hand, in 2018 elections for local and regional offices, residents of large urban agglomerations voted overwhelmingly for pro-democratic and pro-EU local government leaders (Berendt 2018). At the same time, it was Polish cities that saw some of the most spectacular explosions of nationalist sentiments in which the historical hatred toward Jews and other minorities intertwined with anti-immigrant rhetoric aimed at contemporary populations of Others. In Wrocław, for example, in November 2015, a radical Polish nationalist, Piotr Rybak led an anti-immigrant demonstration that culminated in the burning of an effigy of an Hasidic Jew bearing a European Union flag in the historic centre of the city (Haaretz 2016a, 2016b; Harulkowicz 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). While independent Polish and international journalists reported widely on the rising number of

racist and anti-semitic incidents in Polish cities, the official state-controlled media purposely ignored the spillover of hate and violence onto the streets and in fact continue to fuel right-wing nationalist rhetoric. It is in this context, that we consider practices of historical memory of urban agents in today's Polish Wrocław. In the following sections, we briefly introduce the specific urban context of our research and comment on our methodology. Then, we present concrete examples from our ethnographic research followed by a discussion.

### **Jewish Absences in Wrocław**

After WWII, approximately 100,000 Polish Jews, survivors of concentration camps or wartime exile in the Soviet Union, settled in Wrocław or the surrounding region of Lower Silesia (Ziątkowski 2000). The region and the city belonged to Germany up until the end of WWII, after which they were transferred to Polish administration. For some of the Holocaust survivors, the region served only as a transit point before departing for Israel, the United States, or other locations. For some Polish Jews, these Recovered Territories, the lands Poland gained after WWII, became important centres for the rebuilding of Jewish life after the Holocaust. At the end of 1946, an estimated 15,000 Jews resided in Wrocław, making up 7.4% of the population (Ziątkowski 2000). The anti-Semitic campaigns of 1968 brought to a close this post-Holocaust rebirth of Jewish life, with the majority of Polish Jews departing the country. In its aftermath, buildings that had been the centre of both pre-war German-Jewish and postwar Polish-Jewish life in the city, were no longer tied to a vital Jewish community. This specific urban context is important for how individuals who participated in our research conceptualised their work in which they have interacted with Jewish material heritage.

### **Methodology**

Our methodology is inspired by the tradition of urban ethnography, which draws attention to the prominence of cities as anthropological research sites (Pardo and Prato 2013, 2018). Of particular interest to us is ethnographic research, which treats urban areas as spaces in which citizenship and identity are produced through the agency and practices of urban residents (Appadurai 2001, Pardo 1996).

This research grows out of our long-term study of Jewish heritage and memory practices in Wrocław. We are foreign researchers and educators who lived in Wrocław for 16 and 25 years. This article is based on participant observation and the study of heritage-related activities and policies, as well as on our personal engagement in preservation and educational efforts related to Jewish and German material heritage. For the purposes of this article, we selected four individuals with whom we conducted in-depth interviews on the genesis of their engagement with Jewish heritage in Wrocław's urban spaces. The next sections are organized in a chronological order as case-studies focused on the work of these cultural agents spanning the period from 1981 to the present.

### **From Solidarity to 'Hyde Park'**

The birth of the Solidarity movement in Poland is the backdrop for Tadeusz Włodarczak's (age 67) involvement in saving the Jewish Cemetery on Wrocław's Slezna Street known as the Old

Jewish Cemetery, the main burial grounds of the Breslau Jewish community from 1856-1903. Filled with exquisitely carved gravestones and monumental architecture including mausoleums funded by Breslau's wealthiest families, the cemetery — a city within a city — serves as a pantheon to illustrious Jewish citizens and patrons of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Breslau. Growing up in a Polish-Catholic, working-class family in post-WWII Wrocław, Tadeusz was fascinated by the ruins of the German city, especially its cemeteries:

'I knew all the cemeteries in Wrocław in the 1960s, I visited all of them by the time I was in high school. I walked across the whole city, because I was in no hurry. I knew the city inside out, all the stones, all the houses, all the details were etched in my memory and on Sundays, I would go look for all the hidden places [...] I had to explore every nook and cranny, because when I found out that mine is a city which is so foreign to Polish culture and that culture is riding on its coattails, I felt like everyone around me was being deceptive.'<sup>2</sup>



Image 1. Tadeusz Włodarczak at the Old Jewish Cemetery, mid-1990s. Source: Personal archive T. Włodarczak.

The deception Tadeusz refers to stems from the propaganda of the post-WWII Polish state set on erasing the German past of the city and rewriting its history as exclusively Polish. It is important to point out that at the time of his wanderings in the 1960s, large swathes of Wrocław were still in ruins due to wartime battles; postwar Polish inventories of the destruction indicated that 60% of the building stock had been irreversibly damaged (Thum 2011). While a push was made to reconstruct the historic heart of the city in the 1950s (Thum 2011), a decade would pass before the ruins outside the city centre would start to be replaced, often with highly standardised residential housing blocs built hastily to satisfy chronic housing shortages (Thum 2011). In the propaganda of the time, the government touted these mass-produced estates as being superior to the surviving architecture left behind by the Germans. Because of his deep and embodied knowledge of the city spaces, Tadeusz did not accept the official propaganda about the city's past or the communist-era investments. 'I had an emotional connection to the

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, in November 2016.

city. Wherever I went, there was a big difference in quality and aesthetics between what was built before the war and after [...] My rational mind did not want to accept what the Poles were adding to the city was better.’<sup>3</sup>

During the Solidarity years (1980-1989), he established an underground newspaper titled *Wyboje*, which devoted a section to untold histories of the city. Tadeusz explains in somewhat ironic terms the significance of the underground newspaper’s name: ‘The word ‘wyboje’ means potholes, the annoying holes in the road that are in people’s way to a bright future.’<sup>4</sup> In the fall of 1981, on the eve of the All Saints Day, when Poles commemorate their dead, Tadeusz suggested to the editor of a local paper that he would like to write a piece on the lost German cemeteries in the city (Łagiewski 1981). Because the only remaining German-era necropolises were the former Jewish burial grounds (other German cemeteries were levelled by the Polish state in the early 1970s), they decided to visit the Old Jewish Cemetery to take representative photographs to illustrate the article. For Tadeusz, the article was meant to prompt current Wroclavians to consider the heritage of the city they lived in. ‘This was an important topic so that local Poles could know that they are living on German bones and in the houses of the Germans, who they had driven out, and that they were often downing Vodka from their glasses and shitting in their toilets.’<sup>5</sup> When entering the grounds to take the photographs, they found the cemetery to be in a deplorable state: ‘Everything in Field One was lying flat, no gravestones were visible. Along the walls the ivy was growing so densely that nothing was visible. No one can imagine how it looked.’<sup>6</sup> Following this initial visit, the two men met with historical and preservation authorities to discuss steps to halt the continued devastation. Thus began their engagement in the intense revitalisation of the Old Jewish Cemetery, which coincided with the last years of communist rule in Poland (1983-1989). During this time, with a small team, they eventually reassembled and raised at least four thousand gravestones, and repaired and stabilised numerous mausoleums. They also cleared away over 700 tons of urban and industrial waste and recuperated dismantled stone funerary pieces that had been dumped into vandalised tombs. Another challenge was the taming of the greenery that had flourished unrestrained in the postwar years. In our interviews, Tadeusz stressed the crucial importance of these arduous tasks for the preservation of the cemetery, which was destroyed in the last days of war in the clashes between the Soviet and the German armies and uncontrolled vandalism by Poles since the end of WWII.

To lead the stone restoration work, Tadeusz received master stone carver certification and held the position of the official cemetery caretaker for thirteen years. Through physical labour and attentive craftsmanship, he and the small team working under him at the cemetery created the conditions of possibility for the recognition of the Old Jewish Cemetery as a heritage site in the eyes and imagination of the non-Jewish population of Wroclaw and of Poland more broadly. In the latter half of the 1980s a public exhibition as well as a guidebook were created

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<sup>3</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 24 March 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 21 November 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 21 November 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 21 November 2016.



(Łagiewski 1984), and residents were permitted to visit the cemetery in groups led by guides. This marked the reentry of the cemetery into the world of the collective memory of the Polish city. Under the political conditions of the still lasting communist rule, the Old Jewish Cemetery in Wroclaw became a place of open deliberation for diverse audiences. Each public tour, which normally drew between sixty to one hundred people and lasted between two to four hours, became an occasion for critical historical discussion and exchange, impossible in the official space outside of the Cemetery walls due to communist censorship. In this way, the Old Jewish Cemetery in Wroclaw functioned as a public space for what Elzbieta Matynia refers to as the performing of democracy, a crucial element of the process of the building of civil societies and democratic citizenship in Poland (Matynia 2009). Tadeusz remembers:

Topics not presented publicly due to censorship were discussed [at the Jewish Cemetery] freely. It was Wroclaw's Hyde Park. For the several thousands of people who visited the cemetery in the 1980s, thirsty to fill in the gaps in their knowledge about the city they lived in, it was Hyde Park and a university in one, a place to impart unknown knowledge to Wroclavians about the city they lived in and about the people who built the city before 1945. It was a time of extraordinarily intense, romantic work and adventure. The very search for information that interested visitors coming to the cemetery was inspiring for a wide range of professionals tied to the history and material heritage of the residents of the city of Wroclaw.<sup>7</sup>



Image 2. Tadeusz Włodarczak giving a public tour of the Old Jewish Cemetery for citizens of Wrocław, late 1980s. Source: Personal Archive T. Włodarczak.

It is important to point out that Tadeusz's work in the cemetery fits into the larger landscape of Polish explorations of silenced pasts in the final years of communist rule. These

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<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 15 November 2016.

served to counter the homogeneity inherent to the *'pamięć narodu'* or 'national memory', a heritage policy formulated by the regime, which in effect, censored historiography and publications on the German heritage of the Recovered Territories (Thum 2011). Through their work at the cemetery, these amateur preservation activists created a space in the city's landscape — a pothole — which raised questions about the city's past and disrupted the official state historical narrative. Through their work, Wrocław's Jewish heritage spoke to contemporary Polish residents about the actual historical cultural pluralism of their city's past.

### **Animator of European Jewish Spaces of Memory**

Following the anti-Semitic campaigns of 1968, Wrocław's Jewish population dwindled as a result of mass emigration of Polish Jews. The White Stork Synagogue, one of the centres of Jewish life in Breslau and later Polish Wrocław, which had suffered little damage during the war, became the property of the state treasury in 1974. By the mid-1990s, after changing ownership multiple times, and subject to ill-conceived and unfinished adaptation projects, the synagogue, once the architectural vision of Carl Ferdinand Langhans, the son of the designer of the Brandenburg Gate, was in ruins, a roofless, vacuous cavern and endangered historic monument, whose fate would be determined in a new post-communist order.

In 2005, Bente Kahan (age 61), a cosmopolitan Jewish-Norwegian performance artist settled in her husband's native Wrocław, thinking originally that it would be just a base to continue her international artistic career. At the time, the Jewish community was struggling to complete restoration efforts at the White Stork Synagogue since the building had been returned to the community as a part of communal restitution laws of the late 1990s. Since the 1980s, Bente Kahan was performing in Yiddish, focusing her work on Jewish heritage. When she was asked by the Wrocław Jewish community to lead the restoration efforts at the White Stork Synagogue, she says she approached it in the same way as her art — 'working through my life'.<sup>8</sup> She set up the Bente Kahan Foundation through which she ran the Center for Jewish Culture and Education, organizing cultural events in the synagogue and raising money for the building's restoration.<sup>9</sup>

For Bente, her work in Wrocław is tied to her identity as a European Jew and as an artist: 'My agenda is my heritage, and it's always been.'<sup>10</sup> In conceiving programs in Wrocław's urban spaces, Bente stresses the European dimension of her approach: 'My heritage is part of the European narration, which in many places has been erased for so many years because the people disappeared.'<sup>11</sup> For Bente, the continuation of this narration is through the restoration of Jewish spaces in Wrocław and through her artistic endeavors. 'There are two things driving me: it is my Jewish heritage, being a European Jew after the Holocaust; second being an artist, a creative artist.'<sup>12</sup> For Bente, the Jewish space in the centre of Wrocław mirrored similar heritage sites

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<sup>8</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

across Europe — voids cut off due to the Holocaust from historic continuity and the people who had constructed them over the centuries. She speaks of her approach to the restoration of the White Stork Synagogue as a project that ‘grew while I was working’.<sup>13</sup> The level of devastation meant that when conceiving of how to bring life into the space, she was confronted with fundamental questions about its meaning upon completion: ‘This building could actually be anything; all Europe has this Jewish history. Does it deserve to be remembered? And how [should it] be remembered?’<sup>14</sup> She did not want to confine the building’s function to a religious temple, while at the same time insisting on keeping its ties to Jewish heritage. As a result, the synagogue maintains architectural features of its religious function (including a beautifully restored ritual bath — mikvah), but it serves primarily as an exhibition and cultural performance centre inviting citizens of all faiths and backgrounds.



Image 3. Bente Kahan in the restored White Stork Synagogue, 2015. Author: Maciej Kulczynski.

Bente envisions the synagogue as an inclusive space that provides a unique vantage point to confront the challenges of today’s Europe: ‘I think we have big problems with ethnic minorities in Europe, and the Jewish experience is an important example of an ethnic experience in Europe.’<sup>15</sup> The open nature of the synagogue as a cultural venue clearly marked by its Jewish provenance makes Jewish heritage important in efforts at building pluralistic democracies in post-Holocaust Europe at a time when few Holocaust survivors remain and Holocaust denial is on the rise: ‘There is definitely a lot to learn if you want to build an open society in Europe, tolerance in society and so on. We can’t go forward if we are stuck. And that is why the building is so important because it is itself a monument of a very vital [urban] Jewish community.’<sup>16</sup>

### **The Memory Keeper of the New Jewish Cemetery**

<sup>13</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.



Piotr Gotowicki (age 52) is the caretaker of the second Jewish cemetery in Wroclaw on Lotnicza Street. Known as the New Jewish cemetery, this burial ground was established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the other necropoles had reached full capacity. Today, the cemetery is used by Wroclaw's small Jewish community. Its large grounds contain both German-Jewish and Polish-Jewish graves, as well as a unique memorial to German-Jewish soldiers who died fighting for Germany in WWI. For visitors to the cemetery, one senses the totality of the abandonment and devastation wrought by the Holocaust and postwar neglect and vandalism. Today, approaching the historic entrance gate, one is met by barbed wire. Due to Piotr's efforts, the peripheral fence has been sealed, allowing for large sections of the cemetery to be restored, including the clearing of pathways and raising of tombstones. Many of the stones are still marked with anti-Semitic graffiti. Piotr works out of a poorly heated trailer, and spends most of his time caring for the grounds alone. If the budget permits, he hires a helper to raise stones or do other necessary upkeep of the grounds. Piotr also protects the cemetery from intruders and provides assistance to those caring for family graves in the Polish section of the cemetery, and helps families from around the world find burial plots of their loved ones.



Image 4. Piotr Gotowicki (left) at the menorah lighting ceremony during 2016 Hanukkah celebrations organized by the Szalom Alejchem elementary school. Photo by Karol Krukowski for the Szalom Alejchem elementary school archive.

Piotr was born in Wroclaw and became aware of his Jewish lineage as a young man in the early 1990s. Throughout the communist era (1945-1989), like in many Polish-Jewish families after WWII and then in particular after the Polish anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, ties to Jewish heritage became well-guarded family secrets not always shared with the younger generations. Piotr's coming out as a Jew and the deepening of his Jewish identity coincided with a thaw that began just prior to the fall of communism in 1989. Prior, the exploration of Jewish identity had been difficult:

'In the 1970s there still existed the Front of National Unity, which meant that if you had a Polish identity card, you were Polish. Nowhere was it indicated if you were a Gypsy, a Jew or a Muslim or anyone else. So at that time, you did not feel these things. In fact, very few people knew that Wroclaw had been a German city,

because it was not talked about. It was sometime in the early 1990s when all of these things started to come alive, it was a rise in consciousness. The older you were, the more aware you became. And it was easier to get involved in this history.<sup>17</sup>

At first, Piotr's Jewish identity became entwined with religious practice. In the 1990s, he went to Warsaw to join other young Polish men in courses designed to train them about Jewish life and traditions under the guidance of today's Chief Rabbi of Poland, the American-born Michael Schudrich. In 1998, at the suggestion of Schudrich, Piotr moved to Israel to continue his studies in an orthodox Yeshiva for emigrants from the former USSR. He lived in Israel for nine years, initially supporting himself with odd jobs and later becoming a jewelry maker for a gallery in Jerusalem, utilizing his previous academic training in the fine arts. While in Israel, he moved away from strict religious practices and in 2007, he returned to Wrocław where his career at the New Jewish cemetery began. At that time, the cemetery was in a poor state. Postwar accounts penned by German Jews who visited the city in the 1950s indicate that the cemetery, while having sustained some damage due to ground battles, was largely intact. In his book on his travels east of the Oder-Neisse line in the 1950s, Breslau-born Holocaust survivor Ervin Hirschberg reported finding the graves of both his parents and other family members when visiting the New Jewish Cemetery (Hirschberg 1955). In subsequent postwar years, not only was the cemetery repeatedly vandalised, by the early 2000s large sections of the grounds were devoid of markers due to decades of exploitation of the site by gravestone producers and builders looking for raw material that could be repurposed. Piotr recalls his first encounter with a local who came to the cemetery in search for stone:

'At the start of my brilliant career here, the gate was wide open with people coming in and out. I remember some guy in a small *Cinquecento* or *Seicento* coming and asking if he could enter? I invited him in. After a half an hour he came back carrying a measuring tape. He asked me if I could help him load a stone he found with the exact measurements he needed into his car, because he couldn't carry it alone.'<sup>18</sup>

Piotr added: 'This story is not a joke. If things continued that way, in a short time, the cemetery would have ceased to exist.'<sup>19</sup> Piotr stresses that he likes his work in which he does not find spiritual or religious meaning. Instead, he is passionate about the history of the city and is motivated by trying to save Jewish material heritage from disappearance due to vandalism and decay. When asked to define his job description, he replies that his responsibilities are: 'To work so that this place functions well; that there are no night time parties here; that I don't have to collect empty bottles in the morning as I did 8-10 years ago; that people don't light campfires here. Simply put, to introduce civilisation here so that I will not have to be ashamed for how things look — that's my job description.'<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.



Image 5. Children walking through a section of the New Jewish Cemetery largely devoid of markers due to postwar vandalism and thievery. Summer 2017. Source: Szalom Alejchem elementary school archive.

What Piotr finds most satisfying is the ability to uncover hidden history of the city and tie people to their missing heritage. He notes his email box is full of thousands of correspondences with people searching for their relatives and their family pasts for whom he is the only link. He reads Hebrew and Yiddish, and like an urban memory detective, links the names of those buried at the cemetery with former family addresses on German streets and the location of their burial plots: ‘For the majority who come here because they have family members [buried here], this is the last physical memory of the pre-war Breslau Jewish community. I get a great deal of satisfaction when I find someone, and I am able to send a photo that they are here. For me that’s very important.’<sup>21</sup>

Piotr’s work at the cemetery is the fruition of his deep personal searches for his own identity and his attempts to understand his Jewish heritage in its religious and cultural aspects. The ties to this heritage are forged today not through religious practice, but through his connections to Jews who have family ties to the city and the burial ground. Piotr meticulously traces the fates of German and Polish Jews largely forgotten by today’s citizens of Wrocław. For the descendents of these former residents of Breslau and Wrocław, Piotr is a memory keeper, the vital link to their past, to the dwellings their families once inhabited, and their loved ones’ final resting places.

### **Children Reclaiming the City: Arts, Identity, Education**

Agata Ganiebna’s (age 45) deep involvement in German-Jewish and Polish-Jewish heritage grew out of the challenges she faced as a single mother seeking educational opportunities for her child. In addition, she was inspired by her professional experience as a cultural manager working in the theatrical arts, where themes of Jewish life and identity emerged in the works of

<sup>21</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 19 December 2018.



Bruno Schultz and Tadeusz Kantor — Polish-Jewish writers and thespians. Between 2012-2019 Agata headed the Szalom Alejchem independent elementary school in Wroclaw. The school's innovative curriculum allowed students to explore their own identities in dialogue with the urban spaces that hold the history and memory of the once vibrant German-Jewish community of Breslau and the Polish-Jewish community of Wroclaw — both long marginalised in Polish historiography and local civic life.

Agata's journey to minority education began as a parent trying to secure a secular education for her daughter. Opposed to Catholicism's pervasiveness in Polish education, in the public school, her daughter faced ostracism and peer scrutiny as the only child in her class not to attend religion courses. When Agata realised that her daughter would continue to face these pressures throughout her primary education, she sought alternatives: 'I came to the conclusion that I would have to fight a losing battle in every public school and I decided it just didn't make sense at all.'<sup>22</sup> That is when Agata moved her daughter to an independent Jewish school located one street away.



Image 6. Agata Ganiebna (right) with her daughter Zuzanna Malinowska on the grounds of the Szalom Alejchem elementary school on the occasion of a Fall family and neighbourhood picnic in 2014. Source: The Szalom Alejchem elementary school archive.

In 2012, Agata decided to establish her own Jewish school in which she could build on her nuanced and hybrid understanding of Jewish culture and identity. At Szalom Alejchem, a school named after the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, children of diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds as well as those with a range of disabilities were immersed in an inclusive learning environment, which instilled capacities for tolerance and mutual understanding, civic responsibility and social engagement. Szalom Alejchem was at the time one of three Jewish schools in the city, which all functioned under the Polish legislation on minority rights education and received state subsidies. Students' education, while grounded in a rigorous adherence to the fundamental pillars of the compulsory Polish curriculum, was enriched by the study of Jewish history, culture and traditions. The school adhered to the Jewish calendar and the children celebrated Jewish holidays, which changed their sense of time and

<sup>22</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 28 February 2019.

communal belonging. They learned to see the city through a hybrid lens, as a cosmopolitan composition of not only Catholic and Jewish practices and identities, but also those of multiple Others. The diverse composition of the student body and the complex historical backdrop of the city in which the school was located, forced Agata to practice the Jewishness of the school in a processual and dynamic framework, which accommodated fluid and porous identities:

‘That’s how life functions in Poland after the Holocaust and after 1968 and everything else, that you can come to a school which is in some ways Jewish and in some ways not Jewish, but you can in your own way practice your Jewish identity without having to explain yourself. School allows for the building of identity in different ways, even if someone only has one great grandfather who was Jewish - not even a great grandmother - and wants to relate to that and build their Jewish identity.’<sup>23</sup>

In spite of this fluidity in accommodating different ways of understanding and relating to Jewishness, Agata, who is herself not Jewish, was deeply aware of the precariousness of Jewish presence in today’s Poland and her responsibility toward the heritage:

‘I must protect the Jewishness and Jews in this school, because at a point in time you must stand up for something that is not mine, but that I intuitively know is being threatened, even if it is not a direct attack, but you must stand up against appropriation — it is a vigilance, which is very difficult to practice in a Jewish school when you are not a Jew.’<sup>24</sup>

Agata’s cultural and educational project was deeply entwined with the school’s location — the grand family villa of Richard and Paul Ehrlich, the well-known Jewish architects (both murdered in Theresienstadt in 1942), who were the authors of many Jewish and secular public buildings in Breslau, including the New Jewish Cemetery. Szalom Alejchem stood out due to its openness to the city. The school organized festivals — Jewish and secular — and events that were free of charge and that welcomed the surrounding urban community to come visit. In May 2018, for example, Szalom Alejchem opened the villa for a day-long ‘House Festival’, which engaged NGOs, social activists and scholars from Wroclaw and from around the world. It is important to underscore that prior to the school’s existence at this location, the Erlich Villa did not occupy a visible position in the city’s memoryscape. As a part of the House Festival, visitors toured the Ehrlich family home and learned about other landmarks in the city designed by the brothers. Agata’s project went beyond the *genius loci* of the Jewish villa to claim Wroclaw’s urban space through concrete public actions. These included the children’s annual drawing of daffodils in front of the Warsaw Uprising memorial in the centre of the city, the painting of the Marek Edelman mural in the courtyard leading to the old Jewish theater as well as the organization of the Flashmob to the music of the Israeli performance artist Matisyahu: ‘We at Szalom Alejchem have been, and I use this word very purposefully, audacious in public space,

<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 28 February 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 28 February 2019.



we simply walk into public space, taking that space without asking anybody for permission, because we regard this space as ours.’<sup>25</sup>



Image 7. Agata Ganiebna with children of the Szalom Alejchem elementary school visiting the memorial marking the site of the Breslau synagogue destroyed by the Nazis in November 1938. June 2017. Source The Szalom Alejchem elementary school archive.

Situated as actors in the city spaces, the pupils discovered their own agency and developed tools for practicing civic engagement at the local level. Agata also helped students tie into an identity of the city that was emerging, not one that had passed, one in which history and the present were interwoven explicitly.

### **Urban Heritage and Identity**

Wroclaw and Poland remain highly contested spaces of memory, history and identity. Since 2015, Wroclaw’s cityscape has been a stage for explosive displays of exclusionary notions of nationhood, belonging and interpretations of the country’s past. In Wroclaw as well as other large Polish cities, Polish Independence Day has been tainted by evening mass marches by so-called patriots — right-wing nationalists and white supremacists, who have appropriated this day of national celebration with violent demonstrations of hatred (*Gf* 2018, *Koz* 2016, *Gf* 2018, Owens 2015). The Jewish heritage sites to which the work of our interlocutors is tied are frequently targets of anti-Semitic attacks. Most recently, the elegant red-brick walls of Ehrlich’s New Jewish Cemetery were defaced with large white-painted graffiti: ‘Jesus is the King’ (*Kaki* 2019a). Spontaneously formed groups of citizens and youth gathered to remove the paint, however, with only limited success. The shadows of the text are still visible from the street (*Kaki* 2019b and 2019c, *Kijek* 2019). Based on the history of hate posted on its online forum, when articles about Bente Kahan are published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the newspaper staff block readers’ abilities to comment. Children from the Jewish school paint daffodils on the streets of Wroclaw as a part of a national memory project commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in the same spaces occupied in the night by extremist marchers threatening ‘death to the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview conducted in Wroclaw, Poland, on 28 February 2019.

enemies of the nation' (Koz 2016). Exposed and vulnerable in the city spaces, these open society projects taking place against a backdrop of pervasive anti-Semitic and racist agendas, testify to the tenacity of this heritage work led by individuals and small groups of activists.

But there are other encounters that should also be noted that pierce the binary. In the same month that Piotr Rybak burnt the effigy in the market square of Wrocław in 2015, children from the Jewish school planted daffodil bulbs around the memorial to the fallen in WWI on the grounds of the New Jewish Cemetery. While there, they met a group of 'Breslauers' — German Jewish Holocaust survivors living in diaspora — gathered in the city to commemorate the 77th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the night in November 1938 when the main synagogue of Breslau was set alight and destroyed, launching the destruction of European Jews. Agata describes this powerful encounter of school children and Holocaust survivors as the 'meeting of two worlds outside of history and beyond time.'<sup>26</sup> In this space of absence and death, the Breslauers encountered life: 'They came to a place where they no longer had family, and if their family members survived, they were for sure not buried there. They came with an awareness that no one here remembers them and that no one cares, and that in no way does that history have a bearing on the lives of the residents of this city, most certainly not in any school or in the lives of any children.'<sup>27</sup> It is important to stress that what became a deeply resonating encounter was the outcome of Bente's, Agata's and Piotr's heritage work. Without Bente who organized the anniversary events, the Breslauers would not come to Wrocław. Without Piotr's protection of the cemetery, neither the Breslauers nor the children would have been able to interact in this pocket of memory on the margins of Wrocław's urban imaginary. Without Agata and her audacious educational vision, there would be no children visiting and caring for the memory of the Breslau Jews.

## Conclusion

Our ethnographic case studies speak to the relationship between heritage and identity as ongoing and dynamic processes of adaptation and production of belonging and being in the world. The heritage work of the four actors that we portrayed in this article is tied to concrete physical spaces of the city through which they are making possible alternative conceptions of history, memory and identity. Tadeusz Włodarczak transformed his political opposition work of the Solidarity Era into a restoration project that saved one of the few remaining relics of the Jewish-German past of Wrocław for posterity. For him, saving this past was a way of creating an urban space for critical civic inquiry and exchange at a time when public deliberations were restrained by communist censorship and ideology. Bente Kahan translated her sense of identity as a European Jew into the restoration project of the only surviving synagogue in the city, which became an open cultural space through which Jewish heritage speaks to issues critical for diversity and pluralism of contemporary Europe. The inspiration for Piotr Gotowicki's work also derived from his Jewish identity. His heritage work, like Bente's, has an international dimension. Through his preservation work and research, he helps connect Jews from around

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<sup>26</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 28 February 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Interview conducted in Wrocław, Poland, on 28 February 2019.

the world to their heritage in Wrocław. Agata Ganiebna nurtured a cosmopolitan spirit in her pupils when Poland started closing its doors to Europe. Her pedagogy, emerging from her work in the Polish theater, explicitly built connections to urban Jewish heritage, which was given meaning through the engagement of children, parents, teachers and activists. Through the work of these cultural agents, which spans the communist era to the Polish present, Jewish heritage in urban Poland has become a gateway for the building of open society and inspiring civic engagement in both the late-Communist era and today.

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