

MEMORIALIZATION OF THE HOLOCAUST

IN THE POLISH FILM *AFTERMATH* AND IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARY

by **Andrea Petó**

The Polish film *Aftermath* (2012), directed by Władysław Pasikowski, discusses – with pictures and references from the Old Testament – the guilt of Polish peasants for the murder of the Jewish inhabitants of their village in 1939. In the film, two brothers from the village seek to discover the secret, despite being warned against doing so. They end up suffering the consequences of their stand. For a long time, the secret does not even have a name, because the Jews who once lived in the village have been erased from the collective memory, from history. In revealing the hidden secret, one of the brothers pays the ultimate price: he is bound to a cross by other villagers as punishment for having opened the door of silence – for having revealed the hidden tombstones and with them the crimes perpetrated by the villagers. By means of his sacrifice, the outside world is brought into the local conflict, as those who constitute a minority within the community are unable to tell the story, for they too have become “Others”. The murders, we discover, were motivated by the selfish desire of villagers to acquire Jewish property, a desire they legitimized by claiming that the Jews had murdered Jesus. Holocaust historians have forgotten about this tiny Polish village, and a subtle reference to this fact is made in the film, for local history works do not even mention the Jews who had been living in the village and who were murdered there in 1939. The only record of the Jewish community is a number of tombstones, which have been removed from their original location and used to construct a sidewalk, a fence, and – symboli-

cally – the well of the Catholic parish church. One of the brothers has never left Poland and runs a small farm, while the other, having emigrated in 1981, returns to the village when he hears about his brother’s “odd” behavior. The conflict in the village arises when the first brother begins to move the tombstones from the places where they have lain for long decades. In doing so, he disturbs the web of concealment and denial. Poland’s wartime past begins to be processed and explored using religious images, which help people in understanding and interpreting the past. Remarkably, the film accomplishes this without any hint of dulling pathos, excessive romanticizing, or superficiality. The film demonstrates, in an exemplary manner, how one can – on religious and moral grounds, and risking everything – represent and support an issue that has no confirmed or recognized name in the minds of others. Those who lived at some time in the past must be remembered; their tombstones must be visible and their memory must be upheld. This is the goal of the first brother, an uneducated Polish peasant. Assisted by the local parish priest, he brings attention to the tombstones in the graveyard, an action he considers a religious and moral imperative. Can a moral matter be helped, if it has no name? We may well ask this question, for the characters in the film, though they have all been to school, have never spoken of the World War II history of their local area. For various reasons, the modern age (including teaching on the Holocaust) has not yet reached the village. Only one language has been spoken about the past and in connection with the “Other”:

Remembrance is a truly politicized question. Who is entitled to grieve?

PHOTO: PETER ANDREWS / REUTERS / TT



Former prisoners arrive to lay wreaths and flowers at the “death wall” of the Auschwitz concentration camp on International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

the vulgar language of medieval anti-Semitism. Symbolically, the Star of David is tied to the gate of the brothers’ house, thus branding them “Other” too. Using premodern language and basing their actions on morality, the brothers then proceed to seek out the mass grave of the Jews. They do not use the language of academic study or of human rights; rather, they seek to formulate an answer to medieval anti-Semitism at the same conceptual level. In the film, the unspoken, non-verbal, and unnamed event is the murder of the local Jews. By speaking in a visual and moral language that lies outside modernity and secularism, the film is able – from the inside – to give a name to the event and then to determine the responsibility of the villagers. It is this interiorized religious and moral sense of responsibility that the film speaks of, using post-secular language.

The notion of “post-secular society” was first used by Habermas to describe how the separation of church and state is being questioned in the context of non-institutional and spiritual religiosity.

IN CONTEMPORARY EASTERN EUROPE, after the policy of forced forgetting under communism, a memory bomb exploded in 1989. Society was said to have broken out from under the red carpet under which everything had been swept. Suddenly, everything was rendered visible. In the village described in *Aftermath*, even the red carpet was not really needed: the crimes committed had already been covered up, and in the absence of any real contact

with the outside world, the villagers had been able to use communist laws to bury their secret even deeper. Evidently, the situation in Hungary, home to Central Europe’s largest Jewish survivor community, is even more complicated. While silence and forgetting meant, for many, abandoning one’s Jewish identity, among some families and groups of friends the discussion of past events was a means of establishing identity. In informal salon-style gatherings, people told family stories, and this became an important way of establishing group cohesion. Personal narration gave credibility to the historical events: by telling the stories, people made them true. Linked with this were efforts to improve the emotional and intellectual well-being of the surviving mourners, combining the commandment of *nichum aveilim* with memory policy. This commandment connects the story of the brothers in *Aftermath* with the battles over the politics of memory in Hungary.

A change in the politics of memory

The release of the film *Aftermath* gave rise to a heated debate in Poland. There were accusations of anti-Polish slander, and yet the film contained a qualitatively new element: those who have indirectly benefited from the murders are the ones who tell the story in the film through the excavation of the Jewish tombstones. The perpetrators (or victimizers) and their families are living in houses that once belonged to the murdered Jews. Yet here it is the murderers rather than the victims who are now required to narrate the murders. The two brothers in *Aftermath* search for a



Józsek (Maciej Stuhr) watches his cemetery of excavated Jewish gravestones go up in flames.

language in which to express something that they did not witness themselves but which is, nevertheless, a part of them. This is Marianne Hirsch's notion of post-memory, but here remembrance does not mean inclusion in an existing community of remembrance, and so it differs from the manner in which Holocaust survivors gradually established their own community. Rather, here it means being cast out of a community that is founded on a web of silence and complicity and in which there is no possibility of acceptance. The act of being cast out, even to the point of physical destruction (as in the case of one of the brothers), goes beyond language and beyond telling. Even so, it is interpreted in a post-secular frame that still manages to be spiritual, for this alone renders it bearable.

Having reflected on the film *Aftermath*, it is about this language, or lack of language, that I would like to write in my analysis of another similar context. I would argue that “post-secular development” has resulted in a qualitative change in storytelling and in the politics of memory, and that this change poses a challenge to the Jewish community of survivors as they seek to determine how they should make public their memories and tell their stories to a wider audience.

THIS SECOND CONTEXT is the project “Vitrin” [display case] of the Hungarian cultural association *Anthropolis Egyesület*. The project uses visual anthropology in primary and secondary school teaching, with the idea that history should be linked with an object or a specific person, for it is through them that emotions can be evoked and experienced. A private initiative, the project began by working with the history of a single survivor family, its glass case. Initially, the project received support from the Lindenfeld Company and, subsequently, from the European Union. In the course of the project, volunteer primary and secondary school teachers (teachers of media studies, history, and French) were instructed in how to tell personal stories using digital storytelling. Participating students themselves select the stories to be told, do the necessary research, and then make the film. The role of the teacher is to provide the students with professional

assistance throughout this process. The rationale of the project is the reverse of that for the Shoah Visual History Archive, in which events are documented on the basis of interviews following an interview guide, resulting in personalized stories of the Shoah that can then be taught to students. The films of the “Vitrin” project are related only tangentially to customary historical narratives, since the choice of topic is up to the students and is their responsibility. Thanks to the students' familiarity with digital technology, its use in the project caused far fewer difficulties than the organizers had anticipated.

Giving purpose and meaning to the remembrance of the Holocaust

At a meeting held in Budapest to evaluate the project's findings, a bone of contention among teachers was that, ever since it became compulsory in Hungarian schools to observe Holocaust Remembrance Day on April 16, students had exhibited increasing resistance to instruction on the Holocaust. They expressed the view that Holocaust Remembrance Day was just one more formalized and institutionalized expectation in the politics of memory. Some students publicly protested against the compulsory viewing of films about the Holocaust. These developments reflected changes in the Hungarian political discourse that were marked by a growing acceptance of verbal anti-Semitism and a sharper distinction between “Us” and “Them”. The secondary school teachers reported that their students were demanding to know why school time was being used to address things of little importance to them and to Hungarians in general. In this way, the Hungarian/Jewish difference or dichotomy was being recreated in connection with an aspect of memory politics that was aimed at ending that difference. An enormous challenge for teachers was somehow to smuggle in the little word “also”: that is, to gain acceptance among Hungarian schoolchildren that the Holocaust was “also” of importance to them. This is a far cry from the story-telling in *Aftermath*, in which the perpetrators feel they *must* speak out and remember, and do so beyond and outside institutions. This type of discourse is particularly difficult in impoverished regions beset by ethnic conflicts – for instance in northeastern Hungary, where the Us-Them dichotomy is manifest in the hostility exhibited towards Roma people.

ONE OF THE TEACHERS involved in the “Vitrin” project, a history teacher at a school with students mainly from a Roma ghetto, received an odd opportunity. A far-right paramilitary force from a neighboring village – a force with links to the Jobbik party – hounded the local teacher, a village native, out of the area because she was considered to be Jewish. In World War II, the teacher's father had saved six Jews by hiding them in his home. Instead of receiving recognition from the local community, his daughter was now forced to move away from the village. The Hungarian reality differs from the story presented in *Aftermath* to the extent that, although the daughter of the man who had saved Jews in 1944 was forced to flee habitual harassment in her village in 2014, she did not lose her life. Still she paid a price. The defin-

ing memory cultures survive in eastern Hungary in a similar isolation to what we see in Poland.

A colleague wanted to process this teacher's experiences in the "Vitrin" project with the involvement of her Roma students, but the persecuted woman did not want to be featured in a film. Even though she was offered anonymity, she declined to take part – out of fear. The vocabulary used by the director of *Aftermath* to express the story in Poland was not available at this point in the Vitrin project. The teacher rejected the option of giving up her life – although her life would not actually have been in immediate danger. But other films are being created as part of the project, some of them seeking to give purpose and meaning to our memory of the Holocaust. It is not the experiences of others that are transposed into their own situation. Rather, utilizing the possibilities of digital technology, the filmmakers try to put their own experiences and emotions into film.

Trying to make the world a better place

The *tikkun olam*, the basic prayer of Judaism, includes the commandment to repair the world. Much has been written about how this commandment is to be interpreted in the various schools of Judaism, but here, in conclusion, I choose to write about the common roots of Christianity and Judaism and about the shared normative expectation that one should seek to make the world a better place.

In Hungary, which is home to one of Europe's largest Jewish communities, the local Jewish organizations also contributed to silence on memory policy in the pre-1989 period and to creating the post-1989 framework in this field. In 2014, the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust presents an important opportunity for telling stories. Surprisingly, the framework for storytelling has been determined by the paradigm of the *Veritas* Historical Research Institute, which was recently established by the Christian-conservative government. This institute's declared purpose is to research the "truth". Paradoxically, the civil organizations, historians, and Jewish organizations that

have rallied against the Veritas Institute have defined their primary task as formulating and sustaining a "counter-truth" – rather than analyzing the factors that go beyond the true/false binary opposition.

THE FACEBOOK GROUP "The Holocaust and my family", membership in which is by invitation only, posts the stories, memories, and reflections of its members. Each one of the stories is heart-breaking and movingly true. Many people have written the stories of their families and then scanned in or posted photos of their murdered or surviving relatives. A great number have never spoken of these experiences before. Each story is full of the pain of people whose voices have never been heard before. One person noted on the group's page that the establishment of the group was the single positive result of the Hungarian government's politics of memory. Members of the group – isolated as they are from the outside world, from hostile commentators and, indeed, from 90 percent of Hungarian society – have continued the political memory practices that were developed in the house parties and salon-style gatherings of the 1980s.

Now, however, they are doing it in the digital space. Here there are no stories that do not have a place in the traditional Holocaust narrative: there are no Roma, poor people, or LGBTs. In line with the established narrative, women are mothers and protectors. Why should we have any other way of remembering when the accepted framework of remembrance has been formed into what it is over such a long period? While confirmation of one's identity by a reference group is a basic human need, in order to move forward we need also to think about the extent to which the survivors bear responsibility. Which commandment should take precedence: *nichum aveilim* or *tikkun olam*? In this difficult situation, reversing the logic of perpetrator and victim – at first sight a seemingly unacceptable move – may lead to a meaningful result.

The brothers in *Aftermath* did not have Jewish neighbors, and the village-dwellers had never seen a non-white or non-Catholic Pole. In the film's concluding scene, young people who have arrived from Israel recite the *kaddish* by reerected tombstones. In Hungary, it is as though the inevitable introspection of Jewish memory policy has excluded any possibility of looking outwards, and yet the two practices are not necessarily incompatible. At its extraordinary meeting of February 9, 2014, the Federation



In downtown Budapest, on Liberty Square (Szabadság tér), a monument was erected by the government to commemorate the German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944. Due to continual protest against the monument – which denies responsibility of the Hungarian state in the Holocaust – as it was being erected, it is protected by a white barrier against the protesters, who created an alternative exhibition in front of it.



The Vitrine project collects digital storytelling from students, to make the new generation part of the remembrance of the Holocaust. The participating students choose topics and do the necessary research themselves.

of Hungarian Jewish Communities (Mazsihisz) declared that it would not take part in the events of the Holocaust commemorative year established by the democratically elected government because it disagreed with the decisions of the government in the field of politics of memory. Mazsihisz then made it known that it would observe the commemorative year separately.

Through its decision, the federation effectively renounced the opportunity to participate in the development of a memory culture in which many do not understand – and do not want to understand – what they are supposed to be commemorating in connection with 1944. “Chosen traumas”, to use Vamik Volkan’s term, are placed in opposition to experienced trauma.

THIS DILEMMA, HOWEVER, is significantly more complicated than that faced by the Polish brothers in *Aftermath*, who merely knew about the existence of a secret. The teacher in the northern Hungarian village who shuts herself in her rented room and dares not speak of her father’s actions to her colleague, who wants to discuss those actions in the presence of her students, will find her position is far more difficult. The crimes – the murders – are still present; they have not passed away and will not pass away. The only change concerns the framework of remembering. But if we are to make the world a better place by speaking about such issues, then we also need to recognize that the world has changed: digital technology has not only modified our access to the past; it has also altered what we regard as authentic. Another change concerns our expectations in regard to the politics of emotion in a post-secular world.

What remains, however, is *tikkun olam* as a practical everyday commandment. By recognizing emotions and identity, we are able to reach out to others. If we fail to understand “Others” – Roma people or LGBTs – we too will be left vulnerable. And unless we can define ourselves in conjunction with someone else, we will have failed to truly understand the deeply immoral and corrupt logic that gives rise to the notion of the “Other”. We all bear responsibility for the rise in anti-Semitism, for Holocaust denial and for the relativizing of crimes. Sulky disdain for those who think differently from “Us” and a belief that “We” are the only ones who know objectively what happened will lead only to a further polarization of society and of memory cultures.

In the recent past, there has been a failure in Hungary to devel-

op an internalized narrative among those who do not regard – or do not experience – the Holocaust as their own personal story of suffering and who, in the framework of post-memory, do not consider themselves in any manner responsible. Yet the parents and grandparents of these people worked diligently in the Hungarian state administration to make inventories of the assets of the Jews, and even moved into the apartments allocated to them after the Jews’ departure and always considered it best not to inquire about their previous occupants. In the impoverished village in northern Hungary, the Roma children asked the teacher in vain about her father’s stories; they received no answer.

The history of the Holocaust is the history of Europe; as Europeans, we all continue to live it. It is not wise to appropriate to ourselves the story of suffering, because even in the short term such a course will lead to isolation and a rise in anti-Semitism. The brothers in *Aftermath*, by going beyond themselves and the traditions of their family and community, were able to reach out for a different frame of post-secular memory policy. That was put in into practice by the “Matzeva Project” in 2014 – which collected more than 1000 tombstones (matzevas) that had been used in the Praga district of Warsaw, in roads, walls, even toilets, or as whetstones – to return the fragments to the cemetery. The two brothers in the film rendered themselves vulnerable as a result, but if we are honest, we know this to be a task that faces all of us. By following the traditional commandment of *tikkun olam*, we can accomplish this task – and shed less blood in doing so than in the film, we may hope, although we should be under no illusions. ❌

Note: An earlier version of this article was published in German in *Bet Debora Journal “Tikkun Olam”: Jewish Women’s Contribution to a Better World* (autumn 2014).

reference

- 1 <http://vitrinmesek.hu/a-projektrol/>.

In Post-Holocaust Europe we all have to engage with the past. No one escapes history.