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Deconstructing the Topos of Poland as a Jewish Necropolis in Texts by Israeli Authors of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation[1]

Abstract: The paper aims at recognizing and describing the ways of deconstructing the topos of Poland as a Jewish necropolis, a process that in the last decade appears more and more often in the works of Israeli authors of the third generation after the Shoah. The generation concept – as I argue – can serve here as a useful tool for understanding the shift which occurred in the specific national context of Israeli Holocaust discourse and strongly influenced the image of Poland in Israeli literature and culture. Poland depicted as a Jewish necropolis has become one of the central motifs present in Israeli literary as well as the artistic canon of Shoah representations. As the central space where the Shoah occurred, Poland was obviously perceived as a land marked by death and formed exclusively by the experience of the Holocaust. However, in the aftermath of two major shifts that have occurred in the last decades: a meaningful change in the Israeli Holocaust discourse and the new reality of Poland after 1989, and also as a consequence of the growing time distance separating yet another generation from the events themselves, numerous authors born in Israel mostly in the 1970s and in the 1980s began approaching the abovementioned motif critically. This tendency, one of the few typical for the third generation, is demonstrated either through the motif's deconstruction and subversive usage or, more radically, by employing the genre of alternate history and changing the place's identity (e.g. *Tel Aviv* by Yair Chasdiel). The topos of Poland as a necropolis has therefore been turned into a part – or even a starting point – of the reflection on collective memory patterns (e.g. *Kompot. The Polish-Israeli Comic Book*), stereotypes (e.g. *Bat Yam* by Yael Ronen), and on the authors' own roots and identity (e.g. *The Property* by Rutu Modan). By analyzing the abovementioned texts, I will explore the process of constant interaction occurring between collective and the individual memory, between the Israeli

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national perspective and Polish landscapes, between an author and the space and, finally – between the category of the third generation and its representatives themselves.

Introduction: Poland in Israeli collective imaginarium

In one of the first scenes of *Bat Yam*, a theatre play by Yael Ronen and Amit Epstein, an Israeli three-generation family travels by a taxi from Warsaw aiarport to a hotel. The taxi driver offers to stop next to the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Then Nili, one of the characters, turns to her father, Yaakov, a Holocaust survivor: "Dad, why don't we get out? Don't you want to see the Jewish cemetery?". The father's reply seems particularly significant: "What is there to see? Look to the left, look to the right. This whole country is a Jewish cemetery" (Ronen, Epstein, 2009, p. 134).

Poland described as a Jewish necropolis belongs to the motifs that are constantly used in Hebrew literature in order to relate to the subject of the Shoah (Budzik, 2016). Shoshana Ronen points out that Poland, as described by Israeli authors, is never a neutral space nor incidental scenery (Ronen, 2015, p. 4). As the main site of the events of the Shoah, Poland encompasses the experiences of many centuries of thriving Jewish culture, of the Holocaust having put a violent end to what had been known before, as well as of the void that has descended upon it.

The quote from *Bat Yam* recalled at the beginning accumulates some of the most characteristic elements of the phenomenon. The action of the play takes place during the journey of a Jewish-Israeli family to Poland, in order to reclaim the family's property in the town of Tykocin. The tensions between the Holocaust and post-Holocaust generations clearly illustrate some shifts that have occurred in the Israeli Holocaust discourse during the post-war decades. Yaakov, a Holocaust survivor, is sceptical about the trip and unwilling to share any details of his experiences during the Shoah. His children, Nili and David, are struggling with their own trauma of growing up in a survivor's family. The youngest generation, Naama and Itamar, already had their Holocaust memory perception shaped by the institutional, national discourse and their vision of Poland consists mostly of the clichés used in the official narrative. In spite of all those differences, all their perspectives turn out to have one thing in common: the characters, regardless of their generational belongingness, depict Poland as a Jewish cemetery that hides no more than the traces of Jewish life on Polish soil as well as of its tragic end.

The cemetery that is identified with Poland is a peculiar one. The notion of Poland as a Jewish cemetery has arisen to a high degree from the breakthrough in the field of cultural perception of burial grounds which was caused by the Holocaust. As a consequence of the dehumanization of the Shoah's victims, as well as of attempts to remove the traces of the

genocide, millions of murdered people were deprived of community, the right of subjectivity, the body itself, and eventually they were denied the grave. Time and again the mourning over the dead does not have a clear point of reference in actual space, so the non-existant cemeteries are inscribed into a symbolic framework (Czapliński, Quinkenstein, Traba, 2014) and gain wider meaning.

Such a status of Poland in the Israeli collective and, above all, literary imagination, along with the identity of a Jewish cemetery, contributes to a literary and, broadly speaking, a cultural topos, a category of essentially rhetorical provenance (Curtius, 1972). Its aim is to affect a person and cause a certain effect by means of evoking a particular motif. This is premised upon several factors, among which the most relevant one is – according to Janina Abramowska – its semi-finished, ready-made nature (Abramowska, 1982). Therefore a topos that relates to the same assumption (e.g. the topos of reckless youth) may be put into varying contexts and be used to achieve diverse goals. This is precisely how the topos of Poland as a Jewish cemetery can be understood, since it can take on a biographical and organic, as well as a metaphysical, symbolic and non-literal shape in Israeli culture. It may become a reminder of gruesome events of the Shoah, point to the "contaminated landscapes", as Martin Pollack refers to it (Pollack, 2014), or blur the semantic boundaries between the terms "Poland" and "Auschwitz". In some texts it is associated with the literally understood land that holds the remains of the dead, buried without graves, in others it relies on the perception of Poland as the site of the extermination of European Jewry and the space where an end was put to its culture. Thus, it might belong both to the sphere of collective and individual experience, blurring the boundaries between them.

Many of those strategies were present in Eretz-Israeli and Israeli narratives directly after the Shoah and even before, when the first reports about the situation of European Jewry reached the Yishuv. One of the first literary reactions to the tragedy of the Holocaust was *Rekhovot ha-Nahar* collection by Uri Cvi Grinberg (Govrin, 2002 pp. 313). The poems included in the collection describe the author's (and in a sense the whole generations') mourning of the lost Jewish world in Europe. One of the pieces called *Gi' Celmavet* ("Death Valley", Grinberg, 1978) presents a very loaded image of a lost family house and–as the rest of the collection expresses (even through its title) an overwhelming sense of personal loss and individual grief. However, depicting Poland as a "death valley" quickly became an element of the collective narrative based on an opposition between Poland and a Jewish state that was just about to be established. In 1946 Eretz-Israeli journalist Shimon Samet visited Poland as one of the first Israeli press correspondents and described what he had seen in the reportage *Ba-woi le-mokhorat*. The author writes: "Polish Jewry has been exterminated and will never revive in its old-time strength and glory. Its mute scream is still reaching us from the Death Valley, but for those who survived a new life is waiting in the newly emerging country – their historical Motherland" (Samet, 1946). More than forty years later, in Yehudit Hendel's reportage *Leyad kfarim shketim*, the category by means of which the author constructs the descriptions of Poland is the void, while the identity of

a cemetery is assigned to every single place that she wants to visit but she eventually does not, which she expresses through the constantly repeated phrase "I didn't go to Kałuszyn/Krasnystaw/Krosno. What should I look for in Kałuszyn/Krasnystaw/Krosno" (Hendel, 1987, p. 54–64).

Labelling Poland as a Jewish cemetery has become a petrified literary device that many Jews arriving in the country after the war clung to. In the ideological narratives this procedure is linked to an enunciation "Mi-shoah li-tkumah" ("From Holocaust to revival"), where the term "Shoah" in general refers to the whole diaspora, often symbolised by Poland. It is deeply rooted in culture and among other possible interpretations may indicate a contrast between Poland as a land of death and Israel as a country of the revival and life of the Jewish nation. Mostly by means of the latter tendency describing Poland as a Jewish cemetery has also become a cultural cliché that rules common associations and affects narratives of pathos, whose degree of common intelligibility in terms of the collective cultural imagination makes them easily adaptable to popular visions of the Shoah, which I widely discussed in one of my previous articles (Budzik, 2016).

An intergenerational change that has occurred in this field is an effect of new currents that appeared in Israeli collective narratives of identity in the 1980s. It was only then that historiography started exploring a critical reflection upon the shape of the existing discourse dealing with the past of Jews and of Israel. In the wake of the crisis of the Zionist myth, two new worldviews developed simultaneously: one can be described as neo-, and the other as post-Zionist (Ram, 2003); both of them will be reflected in some of the texts I will discuss in what follows. Along with the publication of Yehuda Elkana's article *Bi-zekhut ha-shikhekha* (Elkana, 1988), there appeared a label of "new historians" which was applied to the generation of such authors as Tom Segev, Idith Zertal, and Moshe Zimmermann. They offered a new vision of the past, examined from the post-Zionist perspective and premised upon the revision of the national fantasies and myths which founded the Zionist ideology, as well as on the critique of the common practice of using the Holocaust as an argument in political discussions, particularly strong after the elections of 1977, won for the first time by a right-wing party. According to many, since then the rhetoric of comparison between the Holocaust and the current political situation gained a new place in the public discourse. Also the status of the Holocaust in education programs had changed: it became a permanent part of the curriculum, whereas seventh grade students started taking part in a newly established "roots program" (Litvak-Hirsch, Chaitin, 2010). Not a long time later, in the middle 1980s, the first school pilgrimages to the memory spots in Poland were organized, strengthening the contrast between "the land of death" (meaning diaspora in general, often symbolized by Poland specifically) and "the land of life" (meaning Eretz Israel) (Feldman, 2005, p. 2). This shift was, on one hand, indicative of a change in attitude towards the survivors, who had previously often been treated condescendingly and from that time began to receive more attention and empathy, and, on the other – the stronger presence of Holocaust topics in everyday discourse started to be perceived as an objectification of the event. The critics

of using the Shoah to deal with the present situation argued that instead of reclaiming the memory of its victims, such usage turns the Holocaust into an abstract, meaningless figure (Zertal 2005, p. 2).

The latter tendency found its reflection in the texts of culture very quickly. Still in the 1990's Ha-Khamishiya ha-Kamerit cabaret, satirically criticizing various aspects of Israeli reality, referred to the topos of Poland as a cemetery in a subversive manner in the skit entitled *Sokhnei Mesilot* which presents a travel agent offering a trip to Poland, that is a "basic travel bundle, twelve days, seven concentration camps, afternoon to be spent in the Warsaw ghetto, one spare day for shopping". One might argue that this trend has been heavily enforced by the new generation. Its singular critical potentiality, which has arisen from linking the Holocaust with the medium of popular culture, as well as satirical conventions, has been convincingly examined by Eyal Zandberg (Zandberg, 2015) and Liat Steir-Livny (Steir-Livny, 2014, 2017). While focusing on the field of television, Zandberg argues that popular representations of the Shoah can lead both to the critique of the objectification of the Holocaust in the collective memory and to a revision of various different phenomena in the Israeli community:

The medium of television and the genre of humor are cultural perspectives. The very nature of television leads to the secularization of the Holocaust, because in order to keep a constant flow of content, television must deal with a range of mundane, everyday topics. This tendency is even more obvious when it comes to humor: its playful, non-serious, irresponsible nature radicalizes the secularization process. Furthermore, the study suggests that, surprisingly, the less culturally appreciated skits signify the radical change, the sketches that did not make a critical statement indicate an option for alternative, less traumatic memory. (Zandberg, 2015, p. 119).

In this paper I would like to focus on the texts whose authors, counted among the third post-Holocaust generation, on account of different reasons and owing to varying strategies decided to deconstruct the topos of Poland as a Jewish necropolis. I argue that these artistic decisions, while referring to the same motif, might gain different meaning depending on the context they are being put into. I will make an attempt to point out how different outlooks and aesthetic choices influence the variety of possible consequences of these decisions, while at the same time reflecting some broader phenomena in the Israeli collective memory and certain tendencies discernible (among many others) in the process of shaping Israeli identity. Thus, employing the motif of Poland in the context of the Jewish cemetery topos might reflect various ideological claims. They might range from a critique of the Israeli institutional memory discourse to statements on the relationship between Jewish people and the Land of Israel.

Deconstruction as a satire

More than ten years after the first Holocaust satires appeared on Israeli television, a strategy of resisting generalizations has been adapted by a group of artists dedicated to a different medium. Published in 2008, an anthology *Kompot – Polish-Israeli comic book* has become a record of the clash between stereotypes that both Polish and Israeli culture abound in, placing the Holocaust in the background, as well as in the very center, turning it into a constant point of reference. The medium of a comic book that has been used by the artists in this case does not remain irrelevant, but by means of its limitations and its capability it significantly influences the final shape of presented stories.

As much as there is no doubt about the pop cultural provenance of a comic book, it is difficult to deny that its form has already been successfully introduced into well-established memory mediums, mostly due to Art Spiegelman's masterpiece *Maus. A Survivor's Tale*. Notwithstanding the newly gained position and actual role that graphic novels play in the history of cultural representations of the Holocaust and its post-memory, one must take into account that "as an artistic genre" they are "still regarded as a parody of «serious» literature, a sort of grotesque-like development of ruling story conventions (…)" (Bojarska, 2006, p. 385). Viewed from this perspective, the role of a this particular medium seems to forward two fundamental tendencies: on one hand it favors satirizing the topics that are commonly considered sensitive, and on the other – it radicalizes both the content and the context it is placed in. These two premises have been consequently fulfilled by the Israeli authors of the *Kompot* anthology, the ones I focus on in regard to the subject of my paper. The great majority of them aim at critical elaboration on Israeli institutional patterns of memory, at fighting generalizations and clichés that have piled up over the years in regard to Poland (e.g. *Jews Ruined My Life*, *Shoshke in Poland*, *Beyond the Words*). It is clearly discernible in one of the scenes of Ze'ev Engelmayer's *Kuriza in Auschwitza*. Its female protagonist, a rubber hen that embarks on a journey to Auschwitz, starts an affair with a teddy dog of Polish origins in a museum canteen. Against a background of Polish landscape, which brings to mind post-camp images, she says:

"The grass in Poland is greener and it has nothing to do with reddish history. Autumn leaves in Poland are not wrinkled memories. They are just autumn leaves. Rain in Poland is not tears of the oppressed. It is just H_2O. And the gas I am passing is not an echo of different gasses, it's just a fart" (Engelmayer, 2008, p.81).

The Engelmayer strategy, based on recalling the well-known clichés in an exaggerated and subversive manner aims at uncovering the absurdity which constitutes them. The usual rhetoric used while referring to Poland, situated on the highest level of pathos, here, through bombastic metaphors, is being confronted with the trivial interpretations which suggest the irrelevance of the sophisticated interpretations of elements of Polish landscape, treated exclusively as a scene of traumatic events.

Revising memory patterns

The medium of a graphic novel has been also used by Rutu Modan in her well-known *Ha-Neches*, which is an account of a young Israeli, Mika, and her grandmother Regina, travelling to Warsaw, the city in which the latter spent her childhood and youth Unlike than in the volume *Kompot*, Modan does not let the satirical convention preponderate. Only at times is it favored against the melodramatic plot, as in scenes criticizing the instrumentalization of collective memory. The apparent reason of the visit is to reclaim a flat which had belonged to the family but was appropriated during the war. From the very first scenes it is clear that Regina's war experiences have left her with massive resentments in regard to Poland and the Poles and this is why she constantly tries to keep her distance. Whilst on the plane she claims: "I have no interest in Warsaw. It's just one giant cemetery" (Modan, 2013, p. 15).

Yet, it turns out that the real target of Regina's journey was not to reclaim a family estate (which apparently does not exist), but to find her pre-war loved one, a Pole. As much as she tries to manifest her animosity towards Poland, it proves to be superficial. Modan exploits the topos of Poland as a massive cemetery and recaptures typical situations expected in this context: a family journey to the world where "there is nothing to look for" (Modan, 2013, p. 15) or a school trip whose schedule says "Monday – Treblinka, Tuesday – Majdanek, gas chambers included" (Modan, 2013, p. 10). Each of these threads undergoes a gradual process of deconstruction and proves to be superficial, which helps the protagonist release her story.

On the plane from Tel Aviv to Warsaw, the women encounter a group of Israeli high school students, who are taking part in a pilgrimage to memorial sites. After a while, Modan makes her younger protagonist dissent from this experience. In a conversation with the group's guide, Mika admits that she didn't go to Poland, when still in high school (Modan, 2013, p. 14). From the very beginning, this fact creates a distance between her experiences and the ones that are commonly shared by her peers. Thereby, an elucidation is being made: *Ha-Nekhes* is not that kind of story. The following scenes can only further prove this assumption.

When Mika first meets Tomasz, a Polish guide in Warsaw's Jewish district, the man instantly guesses her origins, arguing: "Let's see… you're sitting in a café in the ghetto, you look sad…" (Modan, 2013, p. 42). An attempt to approach petrified clichés regarding emotions evoked by Israeli-Jewish trips to Poland in an ironic manner proves to be unsuccessful. Mika's sadness does not have anything to do with the Holocaust, but with her father's recent death. Thereby, the notions of death and mourning change their collective, nationally determined and politicized traumatic dimension which has ruled Israeli confrontations with Poland so far.

Eventually, the topos of Poland as a Jewish necropolis is refuted in the culminant scene, which takes place on All Soul's Day in a Christian cemetery, most probably in Powązki

Cemetery. On the one hand, by setting the action right there, automatic associations that place the terms "cemetery" and "Poland" straight in the context of the Holocaust are being hindered. On the other, it leads to a fundamental conclusion within the entire graphic novel: Israeli confrontation with Poland can have more than just one narrative frame, while the division between what is "Polish" and what is "Israeli" does not have to be so strictly demarcated. In the above-mentioned scene all the Polish and Israeli protagonists of *Ha-Nekhes* gather together. It also turns out that Regina's beloved Polish man is probably Mika's grandparent. Consequently, the motif of a cemetery escapes the symbolic field which Israeli literature confined it within. It becomes a sphere that blurs the boundaries between national perspectives and nationally determined experience. Warsaw, as so described, gains more meanings than a simple identity of cemetery, thereby, it becomes a field of multidirectional memory according to Michael Rothberg's concept, "that the overlap and interference help constitute the public sphere as well as various individual and collective subjects that articulate themselves in it" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 201). Modan's deconstruction of this topos is not limited to the critique of patterns rooted in the national narrative, but also calls into question the exclusiveness and unambiguity of an a priori imposed national perspective.

Alternate history as a political statement

A highly interesting work in this context is Yair Chasdiel's novel *Tel Aviv*, in which the topos of Poland as a Jewish cemetery is deconstructed by reversing thought paradigms and employing the convention of alternative history. Worth mentioning is the fact that at least several novels published over the last few years use some elements of this conception or make it the major mechanism driving the plot. Among the most notable examples of such pieces are Nava Semel's *I-srael* (2005), Yoav Avni's *Hercel Amar* (2011) and Eshkol Nevo's *Neuland* (2011); each of them presenting a vision of building a Jewish country elsewhere than Israel.

The author of *Tel Aviv*, unlike the aforementioned writers, does not move Israel to a different geographical location, but relates to a subject that, as Gavriel Rosenfeld argues, alternative history tends to omit as too sensitive to be able to investigate possible cracks or to get replaced with a different experience (Rosenfeld, 2005). Not only the fact of having established the state of Israel in its current location, but also the events of the Holocaust have been put into brackets by Chasdiel.

Protagonists of *Tel Aviv* live in a world, in which there was no Shoah (Hitler was murdered by a Jewish military group in 1935), and Zionism suffered a final defeat. As a result, the State of Israel has never been proclaimed, and its actual territory has been incorporated into the Kingdom of Jordan. Consequently, the majority of Jewish settlers decided to return to Europe, preferably to Poland, which in 2010 – that is when the action is set – is home to half of Jewish world population (Chasdiel, 2013, p. 13). By doing so, the author not only

neglects the possible description of Poland as a Jewish cemetery, but he even manages to remove it from the sphere of potentiality.

The main protagonist is a Polish-born journalist, Paweł Heim (previously known as Rafał Heimlich), who after having abandoned the orthodoxy and his shtetl, started living a comfortable life in Cracow. Yet, he decides to accompany his aged father on the trip to the latter's place of birth, that is to the ruined and abandoned city of Tel Aviv, in which the elderly man wishes to be buried. Already by this point a certain reversal in terms of roles that Poland and Israel (or Palestinian territories) play in literature is clearly discernible. Thus, the motif of a cemetery does not vanish, it is only its context that is being changed. Descriptions of Tel Aviv, "the ghost town", as it is dubbed in the novel, unveil a number of motifs that were well-known in accounts of Israeli journeys to Poland (Chasdiel, 2013, p. 115).

The end of the story, that is the main protagonist's desire to return to the abandoned city, expressly reveals the ideological purpose of the novel, which consists in what one review called "a double rejection of diaspora" (Biran, 2013) The man who is unsuccessfully looking for a place for himself in the world of diaspora, seemingly stable and safe, discovers the core of his identity only when he gets to the Land of the Fathers. By deconstructing the foundation of the collective Israeli identity, that is Zionist ideology and the Holocaust, Chasdiel presents the desire to return to Eretz Israel as independent of these experiences and superior to them. At the same time his intention is to highlight the pivotal role that religion plays in this process. However, constructing a detailed image of Poland is clearly not the author's priority: except some minor descriptions of the main character's life in Jewish Cracow, he does not offer any fuller vision of the country and its inhabitants. Even a Polish woman Paweł has an affair with is nothing more than just a figure constructed in order to stress moral unambiguousness of his life choices and the fact that the protagonist's identity cannot be complete anywhere else than in the land of his fathers. Thus, it becomes clear that the alternative reality of Poland Chasdiel constructs is not a space keeping the main message of *Tel Aviv* – the title of which seems to confirm it.

Conclusion

The dualistic nature of the topos, a form that is constant on one hand, but easily adaptable to changing contexts on the other, has significantly set the rules for describing Poland as a Jewish cemetery in the Israeli common imagination and allowed the boundaries between the personal and the collective to blur, as well as the ideological currents to mingle. This very nature proves to be persistent and crucial even when the topos itself undergoes a de-construction. Its "ready-made" status enables various authors to express opposite ideological claims, while proving how intelligible – even if not evoked directly – the topos of Poland as a Jewish cemetery is and how wide its reach may be.

The texts I focused on in this paper present three different strategies of employing the abovementioned motif. Most of the authors of the works included into the Israeli-Polish

comic album *Kompot* tend to evoke the topos of Poland as a Jewish cemetery by construct-ing narratives that abound with pathos and are taken to the extremes in order to unveil their shallowness. In *Ha-Nekhes* by Rutu Modan, Poland becomes a sphere that blurs the boundaries between national perspectives and nationally determined experience. Warsaw, as so described, gains more meanings than a simple identity of cemetery, thereby, it becomes a field of multidirectional memory according to Michael Rothberg's concept, "that the overlap and interference help constitute the public sphere as well as various individual and collective subjects that articulate themselves in it" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 201). In case of Yair Chasdiel's novel rejecting the topos of Poland as a Jewish cemetery is in this particular case meant to prove that Jewish nation's destiny to settle in Israel is enduring and endemic, also when binary division between "the land of death" and "the land of life" is lifted.

Polish reality depicted in the works discussed, albeit significant, is not important *per se* but is rather treated as a cliché that reflects the tendencies developing in the area of the Israeli collective memory and gives a perspective on contemporary mechanisms of collec-tive remembrance, their internal dynamics and diversity. Due to its phantasmal nature it may refer both to the past events and to the current social, political and cultural context, considering the constant interaction between past and present, "here" (Israel) and "there" (Poland), or between individual and collective memory that reveals in these works.

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