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**JEWISH PHOTOGRAPHERS, CONTEMPORARY POLAND,
AND REPRESENTATIONS OF NAZI DEATH CAMPS:
PARADIGMS AND MEANINGS**

To analyze the role contemporary Poland plays in Jewish constructs of memory and, therefore, in Jewish imagination,¹ one must first establish what Poles and Jews hold as their respective self-images and what they assume to be the Other's perceptions of themselves. The attitude each takes towards the Other right now is largely rooted in common history. Although Nazi death camps of WW2 were established by Germany within Germany-governed territory, the historical fact of their location within the borders of pre-war and now post-war Poland influences Jewish attitudes towards contemporary Poland. Most literary representations of the remains of Nazi camps show the existence of a cognitive and symbolic fusion between those camps and contemporary Poland. As written by Jerome Ostrov: "Poland was the monster nation of World War II, perhaps, even more so than Germany. Why? Poland was where the extermination camps were located. Poland once proudly boasted the largest population in Jewish Europe and its loss still remains unbearable in the Jewish psyche. Finally, Poland had a history of pogroms and of segregating its Jews, and, as I saw it, the Nazi atrocities perpetrated on Polish soil would have been impossible without Polish complicity."² However, since the fusion of Polishness and German genocide is absent from images executed in the camps by professional for-

¹ See S. Ronen, *Polin. A Land of Forests and Rivers. Images of Poland and Poles in Contemporary Hebrew Literature*, UW, Warszawa 2007, p. 15: "Poland is not a normal place for Jews and Israelis; they cannot be indifferent to it, they come to the place loaded with knowledge and emotional burdens"; R. E. Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*, University of California Press, California 2002, p. 56: "the country, its landscape, its people, and its anti-Semitism, loom large in Jewish myth and memory".

² J. Ostrov, *After a trip to Poland*, "The Canadian Foundation of Polish-Jewish Heritage," January 28, 2005, (http://polish-jewish-heritage.org/eng/06-02_Jerome_Ostrov-After_a_trip_to_Poland.html; accessed: 13.06.2012).

eign Jewish photographers, I postulate that the meaning of the objects and spaces represented in photographic images as *death camps* falls outside what Jewish visual imagination constructs as contemporary Poland.

Images created in former death camps in Poland by Jewish professionals fall into two categories: they are either culturally-constructed meta-images (and, as such, are independent from contemporary Polish realities) or constitute (equally autonomous) landscapes of memory. I employ photographic material created by the American photographer Jeff Gusky in his 2003 album *Silent Places*³ and an Israeli professional journalist Micha Bar-Am in his 1989 set of pictures entitled “Auschwitz camp ‘victims’ visit camp”⁴ published online by *Magnum* agency, to analyze the meaning of photographic images representing (museums of) death camps in Poland in the context of perceptions of Poland.

My methodology is based on Lotman and Uspienski’s⁵ hypothesis of the existence of a certain symbolic “machine” that maintains social status quo by organizing and controlling cultural phenomena, including representation. The said machine works by upholding existing meanings and reconstructing or deleting the meanings of the phenomena which cannot be accommodated into the existing matrix of cultural perceptions.

When the 20th century developed meta-subjects (e.g. meta-painting: painting *about* painting),⁶ contemporary photographers began taking meta-photographs. Most images taken in contemporary museums of former German death camps are frontal shots of entrance gates, convergent train tracks, towering guard towers, bare autopsy tables, showerheads in death chambers,⁷ and camp ovens.⁸ Mediated by earlier visual and literary rep-

³ J. Gusky, *Silent Places*, Overlook Duckworth, Woodstock, New York, London 2003.

⁴ M. Bar-Am, “Auschwitz camp ‘victims’ visit camp”, 1989, *Magnum* (<http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&STID=2S5RYDOPEF27>; accessed: 13.10.2012).

⁵ J. Lotman, P. Uspienski, *Semiotyka kultury*, PIW, Warszawa 1997.

⁶ J. Lotman, P. Uspienski, “O semiotycznym mechanizmie kultury”, in: *Semiotyka kultury*, PIW, Warszawa 1997, p. 170.

⁷ J. Gusky, op. cit., “Guard Tower” Majdanek, (n.p.); J. Gusky: “Autopsy Table” Majdanek, (n.p.); J. Gusky: “Shower Head in Gas Chamber Complex”, (n.p.)

⁸ Such motifs appear in Gusky’s photographs, but also those by Jason Francisco (“Remains, death camp...”) and “Railway tracks leading to the Birkenau death camp, partially grown over, Brzezinka, Poland” in: *Far from Zion...*; Patrick Zachmann (Im.Ref. PAR188431 (ZAC2000014D07042/03); Elliott Erwitt (NYC103850 (ERE2002001W00038/03 – interestingly, the caption for Erwitt’s image from Auschwitz is: “GERMANY. Auschwitz-Birkenau”), Raymond Depardon (PAR189640 (DER2000012W00008/26A-27), and Gentile photographers such as Josef Koudelka (PAR86146 (KOJ1992017W00363/11A), Steve McCurry (NYC62880 (MCS2005006K002) and Bruno Barbey (PAR45766 (BAB1976 009K134) (all images besides Francisco *Magnum Photos*, magnumphotos.com, accessed 12.02.2010).

representations, such images belong to the category of meta-photography. As such, these photographs “are situated on a different hierarchic level than respective primary phenomena and have different goals.”⁹ Their *primary images*, such as Margaret Bourke-White’s and Lee Miller’s photographs from Buchenwald, constitute documents: they serve as sources of information and proof of the veracity of photographed events.¹⁰ Contemporary photographs from former death camps, although documentary in character, serve neither as source of information nor as document: there is nothing here to prove because *we know it all*. Such photographs denote a particular place and time but, also, other, similar, places, and a different time. They are also twofold in the sphere of references, as they refer the viewer both to the repository of classical journalist photography, and to similar contemporary images taken by amateurs.¹¹

The recurrence of motifs reveals not a weakness in the photographer’s eye, but the functioning of memory. When photographers recapitulate earlier images, they refer the recipient to the signs constructed previously on the basis of Nazi death camp landscape and etched in the visual repository of collective consciousness. Such images participate, therefore, in the self-perpetuation of extant perceptions and representations in the Lotmanian “cultural machine”. By constructing the past in a certain way, it constructs the present.¹²

Reading “history as the objective account, myth as a dubious fable, and memory its fallible recollection” is wrong: it is history, myth and memory *together* that enable a search for the past.¹³ Memory enters journalistic photography when photographs are taken in symbolic places whose topog-

⁹ J. Lotman, B. Uspienski, op. cit., p. 170.

¹⁰ A detailed analysis of the role of journalist photography in creating memory is presented by B. Zelizer in *Remembering to Forget. Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1998, as well as in *Reading the Past against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies*, “Critical Studies in Mass Communication” (Vol. 12/2), June 1995, pp. 214–239.

¹¹ The spaces photographed nowadays by professionals are unlike the images of human degradation that documented the liberation of camps in that they are emptied of people. A separate question is what motivation induces amateurs visiting the camps to photograph themselves, each other, and their children in the barracks, in gas chambers and next to open camp oven doors. The experiences provided visitors by Holocaust museums are scrutinized by P. Gourevitch in *God, Genocide and the Fashions of Popular History*, “International Herald Tribune” 1995 (4 Feb.), p. 2. Another kind of image is the photograph taken by a survivor on his/her visit to the camp.

¹² J. Lotman, B. Uspienski, op. cit., p. 170.

¹³ P. Basu, *Narratives in a Landscape: a Journey Among Monuments*, Department of Anthropology, University College, London 1997, (<http://www.btinternet.com/~paulbasu/narratives/nl-frame.html?http://www.btinternet.com/~paulbasu/narratives/nl-text04.html~Display>, accessed: 12.12.1009).

raphy and the presence of historical objects or ceremonies refer the viewer to particular historically-significant events.¹⁴ Images of desecrated Polish synagogues, ruined cemeteries, and gates to former death camps easily unlock repositories of memory. Therefore, while photographs taken by Gusky in Nazi death camps translate into visual language an element of Polish reality, at the moment of its creation the said element is already its own sign: its image had already been “introduced into the sphere of culture” where it has “the character of a sign.”¹⁵

Gusky’s camp photographs do not constitute a subjective and direct reworking of the subject; each is, instead, a public and multi-photographic construct. Since the construct did not originate with Gusky, the photographic image is not *his* but, rather, reflects a pattern of representation proscribed for his subject by the cultural machine. His photography is, therefore, a “sign of a sign”, constituting, simultaneously, “from a social standpoint (...) an unquestionable reality.”¹⁶ Consequently, the notion of “Poland” in relation to the camps as photographed by Gusky is activated only indirectly, by the caption that triggers in the viewer the idea of Poland as the *land of the Shoah*. In other words, the fusion between Polishness and the camps does not reside in images but in accompanying “literature”.

Photographs taken by Micha Bar-Am in his series “Auschwitz camp ‘victims’ visit camp” are not meta-images; they are, rather, a visual meditation on the vicissitudes of memory. Bar-Am portrays the 1989 visit in Poland of a group of Jewish twins who survived the cruelty of the Auschwitz doctor Mengele. In three of those images, Bar-Am takes advantage of meta-photography by employing archival images as “photographs within photographs”. By “doubling” the faces of the portrayed within fragmentary mirror reflections, he creates portraits which evidence the frailty and imperfection of both collective and individual memory. Bar-Am’s images only marginally involve the workings of the Lotmanian “machine”: rather than reiterate existing cultural patterns of representing the camps, they focus on visualising the Shoah narrative.

The set “Auschwitz camp ‘victims’ visit camp” comprises four photographs, three of which were taken inside the museum, while one shows women praying outside camp buildings. The image entitled “Groups of Jewish ‘twins’ treated by the dreaded camp Doctor Mengele, revisiting the

¹⁴ B. Zelizer, *Why memory’s work on journalism does not reflect journalism’s work on memory*, “Memory Studies” (Vol. 1) 2008, LA, New Delhi, Singapore, pp. 79–87.

¹⁵ J. Lotman, B. Uspienski, op. cit., p. 170.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Auschwitz camp” shows the survivors’ reflections in a glass pane under which there is a photograph documenting the functioning of the camp. The superimposition of images transmits the meaning of the photograph beyond portrayal; Bar-Am’s photograph shows the inability of language (including the language of photography) to represent the emotional, intellectual and ethical implications of a survivor’s return to Auschwitz. Following authors of Shoah testimonies (forced to narrate their experience within the framework of an “outside” language which, as they repeatedly attested, could not describe it) Bar-Am tries to translate the survivor’s return to the camp into the language at his disposal as a photographer (the existing visual matrix). He undertakes to incorporate the extraordinary into the ordinary, and fails: the reflections of survivors’ faces bleed into the archival photograph, merge with objects behind glass, and conflate with reflections of light on glass panes. Bar-Am’s photograph is a visual rendering of the survivors’ words: “[b]etween our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced.”¹⁷ The photographed come to signify a reality which can only be expressed in a – non-existent – language of “brutality” or a “new counter-language of anguish and despair.”¹⁸

Barbie Zelizer claims that the fact that in 1980 American soldiers refused to narrate their own memories of the liberation of death camps (and, instead, showed the interviewers archival photographs) proves that collective memory replaces individual accounts.¹⁹ Bar-Am’s photography however, is an expression of a narrative that resides in collective memory, and, also, an elucidation of the survivors’ personal experience. Merging photographs and images of artefacts from museum archives with contemporary portrayal enables Bar-Am to confate the past and the present.

¹⁷ E. Wiesel, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration”, in: E. Lefkowitz (ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1977, pp. 7–8.

¹⁸ J. Kosiński, *The Painted Bird*, Houghton, Boston 1976, p. 256.

¹⁹ B. Zelizer, *Reading the Past...*, “Critical Studies in Mass Communication” June 1995 (Vol 12/2), p. 234. Zelizer discounts the inability of words to describe the scenes witnessed in camps by the liberating troops. However, as written by Elie Wiesel in “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration”, in: E. Lefkowitz (ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1977, pp. 4–19: Holocaust was “a situation which goes beyond its very description”: the words (thin, dirty, scared, numb) did not reflect what the soldiers saw, because they referred to sensory, emotional, and ethical concepts known from the world before/outside the camp. Perhaps, therefore, the soldiers preferred visual evidence to the evidence of a language whose vocabulary could not recount their experience.

The photographic image from the Auschwitz archive used by Bar-Am shows the selection ramp: train tracks converge in the distance while, in the grayish triangle of snow between them, the Nazis march along the ramp. The visual “stitches” which connect Bar-Am’s photograph with the image reproduced on the museum wall are nearly invisible. It would appear that, since the two images comprising Bar-Am’s photograph are both documentary, they should combine to create an image governed by rules identical to those that govern each of them separately.²⁰ What happens, however, is that the superimposition of the reflection in the glass of the silhouette of the survivor over the photograph taken at the time of the camp’s functioning enables Bar-Am’s photograph to show a “freezing” of time which characterizes trauma. As a voice in the discussion on the attributes and role of archives and artifacts, buildings, and documents vis-à-vis individual human memory, does Bar-Am’s representation involve Poland?

Bar-Am’s photographs are concerned with Poland only in as much as their captions inform the viewer that the images were taken in Poland. Therefore, they contain no evidence of the influence of the Lotmanian cultural “machine” which would highlight the connection between the twins’ visit in the camp and the idea of Poland. The photographer does not focus on the material space photographed – not even on the space of the camp – but on the emotional and philosophical space of trauma. And it is not the image, but the viewer’s knowledge (i.e. information which does not belong to the sphere of the visual, predates his/her reaction to the photograph, and comes into play only upon reading the caption) that infuses the photograph with horror.

The structure of Bar-Am’s photographs differs from the clearly constructed images by Gusky. Bar-Am’s spaces comprise of overlapping sub-spaces, which resembles the workings of memory. In “Auschwitz K.2 Camp, a display of remnants of victims of the Holocaust, thousands of spectacles that were recuperated from the victims” (constructed according to the same visual pattern as “Groups of Jewish ‘twins’”), the outlines of survivors’ faces and silhouettes are concealed (and revealed) within the mass of Auschwitz artefacts. The resulting image is (again, like “Groups of Jewish ‘twins’”) indivisible. Obviously, not even when regarded in the context of Poland as a country where the Germans built death camps or a country whose decimated Jewish population was exiled from the country after the Shoah does Bar-Am’s image focus on the Auschwitz museum. Where Bar-Am directs

²⁰ See B. Uspienski, “Strukturalna wspólnota różnych rodzajów sztuki”, in: *Semiotyka kultury*, PIW, Warszawa 1997, pp. 192 and 202.

his viewers is towards the space brought to the camp museum by survivors, while his photographs are, simultaneously, images of memory revealed and revealing, and a confession of ignorance.²¹

Photographic images reflect solely the external manifestations of things. Analyzing feelings or motivations as represented in photographs involves an assumption that the behaviors and/or phenomena shown can be accurately deciphered as “symptoms of hidden subjective states.”²² Bar-Am’s task was to photograph the twins’ return to the space of trauma: to use his camera to register the bodies that Mengele had used as objects of torture.²³ Consequently, Bar-Am need not be interested in Poland.

According to Uspienski, the position of a viewer/recipient has, out of necessity, a character which is external to the narrative, while the position of the hero/subject is internal. The position of the narrator fluctuates depending on the narrative tool chosen. The shifting of perspective can take place many times within one story. The photographer changes his point of view in relation to the subject described in an image. Frontal, paradigmatic framing of Gusky’s “Auschwitz in Winter #1” (showing the entrance to Auschwitz camp and the sign reading “Arbeit macht Frei”) belongs wholly to the public sphere – and, therefore, not to Gusky. However, the photographer introduces a change into the proscribed visual form: the words over the gate are shown from the inside, as they would have been seen by the prisoners leaving the camp for work. The photographer’s perspective of regarding Auschwitz is “inverted”, internal; he produces an image which shows this shift of perspective.

Gusky’s “Auschwitz in Winter #1” is a play of meanings between the message over the gate, the sign’s location over the entrance to Auschwitz, and the presence in front of it of a Jew with his camera. The photographic image *as such*, however, does not contain the above interplay. It is the caption and the reader’s general knowledge that enable this multiplicity of

²¹ M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer note the fact that a photographic image, recounting the past, reveals and conceals the photographed moment. They describe the photographer’s reaction to prints of his own pictures as “the enormous disjunction between the effect of the scene of witness and of Helmut’s [i.e. the photographer’s] encounter with his photographs”. M. Hirsch, L. Spitzer, *What’s wrong with this picture? Archival photographs in contemporary narratives*, “Journal of Modern Jewish Studies” 2006 (Vol. 5, no. 2), p. 239.

²² P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna: fotografia jako metoda badawcza*, Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2005, p. 80.

²³ A discussion of the implications of experiments undertaken in Auschwitz and Dachau for contemporary ethics is taken up by John J. Michalczyk in “The Ethics of Nazi Human Experimentation: Contemporary Concerns” in: J. H. Banki, J. T. Pawlikowski (eds.), *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust. Christian and Jewish Perspectives*, Sheed & Ward, Chicago 2001, pp. 291–303.

readings. One such reading focuses on the words written over the gate and what these words become when located there; another analyzes the photographed words from the perspective of the fact that the sign was made by camp prisoners; the third, most perilous, attempts to scrutinize the possible image of self that the photographer may find in front of the gate.

In the 1930s German propaganda employed the motto of “Arbeit macht Frei” to fight unemployment; the words were adopted over the gates to the camps in Auschwitz, Dachau, Sachsenhausen, and Gross-Rosen. These words do not inform; they jeer. Read in the context of leaving the camps and returning there, they nullify the image of which they are a part. The photographic landscape thus becomes an element of the words: its meaning (that is, how the viewer perceives the photographed trees, fences and buildings) is determined by the words.

Gusky’s “Auschwitz in Winter #1” constitutes an inversion of the meta-image, suggesting, therefore, an inversion of meaning. Regarding this photograph from the perspective of the fact that the words over the gate paraphrase the words in the Gospel of John (J 8, 32, “Truth will set you free”) allows an introduction into the image of the question whether and, if so, to what degree, the ideas contained in the New Testament are responsible for, first, anti-Judaism, and then, anti-Semitism.²⁴ The 2000 Jewish statement *Dabru Emet*, which reads that “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon,”²⁵ seemed to some²⁶ to too easily absolve Christianity of responsibility, and caused understandable controversy. Simultaneously, *Dabru Emet* confirms that, “[w]ithout the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold nor could it have been carried out.”²⁷ Establishing the role of Christianity and the history of its churches in creating negative images of Judaism and the Jews is, however, the work of theologians and historians; from my perspective, what

²⁴ See R. Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide. The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, Seabury Press, New York 1974. Ruether claims that anti-Jewish reading of New Testament are not a travesty of the original text, but, rather, excerpts inimical to the Jews were introduced into it in the process of developing christology; in M. Czajkowski, *Lud przymierza*, the author analyses and interprets passages from the NT, locating them in their historical context, and postulates the necessity of reinterpretation.

²⁵ *DABRU EMET*, Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies (ICJS) (<http://www.icjs.org/programs/ongoing/njsp/dabruemet>, accessed: 2.10.2012).

²⁶ See A.-J. Levine, *Amy-Jill Levine: Reassessing Jewish-Christian Relations*, “Burke Lectureship on Religion & Society” 2001 (6) [Humanities] [Show ID: 5577] (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGOobQiRAa8>, accessed: 12.01.2010).

²⁷ *DABRU EMET*, op. cit.

matters is the fact that reading the sign in Gusky's photograph as a distortion of a New Testament idea opens up yet another inversion: besides a jeer on the reality imprisoning inmates of Auschwitz, the photograph comments on the totalitarian system's mockery of humanistic ideals.

Another reading focuses on the sign in Auschwitz in the context of the fact it was made by the Polish prisoners working in the camp smithy. The letter "B" in the word "Arbeit" is placed upside-down. It is not necessary for the analysis of the photograph to know whether the prisoners purposefully reversed the letter B. The fact that the photograph made by Gusky contains this double inversion: of the entire sign from left to right and of its internal element (the "B") upside down imbues the image with an ambivalence absent from the many other photographs of the same gate. Its reversed perspective makes of "Arbeit macht Frei" a game within a game: a doubled symbol of protest and an expression of solidarity with the imprisoned.

Finally, one can read "Auschwitz in Winter #1" through Gusky's introduction to *Silent Places*, as the photographer's personal statement. He defines Jewishness through family ethics and an ability to "survive against ... adversity."²⁸ The reversal of the direction of the words over the gate can be read as a negation of the mode of looking designed by the oppressors and, therefore, as symbolic for the Jewish ability to refuse to comply. The paradigm needs no reference to Poland or to Poles; although the testimony concerning Auschwitz (in Poland) is instrumental for the self-description of Jews and for the Jewish image of Poles, the camp's geographical location is irrelevant for its representations.

Gusky's "Auschwitz in Winter #1" and Bar-Am's Auschwitz photographs are visually encoded paradigms of contemporary interpretation of a past experience. As shown by dates, atmospheric conditions, and architectural details, Gusky's images were created one after the other (i.e. in a syntagmatic relation). In *Silent Places*, there is no causal relation and no development in time, nor do the images follow an "irreversible, linear, directional sequence."²⁹ The inter-relation of Bar-Am's photographs is also paradigmatic: although each image contains a narrative which can be read to represent the relation of the survivors to the (archival photograph from the) camp (in the past and the present), considered together, these photographs neither enter a causal relation nor relate to each other as consecutive in

²⁸ J. Gusky, op. cit. (n.p.)

²⁹ P. Sztompka, op. cit., p. 85.

time. Instead, they invert internal structures of space and time, evoking the sensation that Lifton refers to as “This world is not this world.”³⁰

In the centre of Bar-Am’s “Groups of Jewish ‘twins’ treated by the dreaded camp Doctor Mengele, revisiting the Auschwitz camp” there is a reflection of a woman demonstrating, as if to the photographed Nazis, the camp number on her forearm. Her reflection stands framed by two diagonal lines of trains that diverge on her left and right. Her outstretched arm leads the viewer’s eye towards the figures of the Germans within the darkened triangle formed by the train tracks. If one would search this photograph for Barthes’s *punctum*, it is not in the number on the survivor’s forearm, which the woman seems to be brandishing in front of the image, but in the large white bag that she is carrying. Losing families and homes, personal objects, and treasured mementos, prisoners lost their sense of security, their personal inviolability and self-worth. In Levi’s words: a “man who is deprived of everything he loves ... will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering ... for he who loses all often easily loses himself.”³¹ Against all odds, the bright spot in the centre of the frame – the survivor’s bag – is full.

Although from a literary standpoint juxtaposing bodies with mirror reflections may be considered cliché, the surrealism of Bar-Am’s Polish photographs makes out of them visual representations of a moral and structural inversion characteristic for Shoah narratives. Looking at photographs gives structure and sense to the past (demanding that we choose what to show out of what we see and thus simplify the memory so that we can tell a story³²), Auschwitz testimony can – and often must, as said by Elie Wiesel – be neither coherent nor logical. Hence Bar-Am’s surrealism: the poetics of exploded frames, blurred, unfocused shapes, deformed details of face and clothing against dark backgrounds, and brutal cropping of body outlines with frame edges. The image takes its impact from the viewer’s query into *What is it, this enormity?* whose fragmentary reflection s/he sees.

³⁰ R. J. Lifton, “This World Is Not This World”, in: H. Fry (ed.), *Christian-Jewish Dialogue: A Reader*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 1997, p. 191.

³¹ P. Levi, *If This is a Man* and *The Truce*, Penguin, New York 1987, p. 33.

³² See R. Samuel, P. Thompson, (eds.), *The Myths We Live By*, Routledge, London 1990; A. Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust*. Visible Evidence Series (Vol. 3), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1998; B. Newhall, “A Backward Glance at Documentary”, in: D. Featherstone (ed.), *Observations. Essays on Documentary Photography: Untitled 35*, The Friends of Photography, Carmel, California 1984.

The archival photograph quoted by Bar-Am in his image is over a meter long. Its orderly background is contrasted with the broken-up reflection of the silhouettes of former prisoners. Its size allows the viewer to perceive details that show the barbarity of Auschwitz. Scattered suitcases and personal objects attest to the victims' physical and emotional deprivation. Familiar objects outside their usual context acquire new meanings. Luggage, which should await unpacking, is shown to be a tool used by murderers to invalidate victims' lives. The perpetrator and the victim are outside the frame; but the viewer, who sees the photograph within the contextual frame of reference to which it belongs, can identify the centers of power that fuel the events photographed, and make possible the image.³³

Since the life of professional photography depends largely on market forces, the images it propagates exemplify the meanings the media prepare potential recipients for. "Mistakes" in captioning documentary photographs³⁴ indicate that collective consciousness connects death camps with Auschwitz³⁵ and Auschwitz with Poland. Shoshana Ronen claims that "it is impossible to find" in contemporary Israeli literature texts which would relate to Poland "without having the Holocaust at least in the background."³⁶ Ronen's observation proves that representations of Poland are, in the Jewish cultural machine, controlled by the cultural maintenance of the memory of Auschwitz. The photographs by Bar-Am and Gusky, however, show that Lotman's "cultural machine" allows a change in the matrix: there exists imagery which deals directly with the Holocaust and *does not* have Poland as its background. The lack of references to Poland in Bar-Am's and Gusky's Auschwitz photographs may reflect the fact that, unlike literature (which, capable of including representations of *inherited* memories, is more directly influenced by the Lotmanian "cultural matrix" of representation), documentary photography does not show the remains of German death camps as *Poland*; these spaces are not even – despite the frequency of semantic

³³ See J. Spence, P. Holland (ed.), *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography*, Virago, London 1991, p. 52.

³⁴ B. Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget...*, pp. 162–166. Zelizer notes also the silence concerning the camps on German territory (p. 165). I believe that, as Dachau and Buchenwald disappear from the "memory map" of the Shoah, the significance and symbolic weight of other camps (such as Auschwitz or Treblinka) increases.

³⁵ As explained by Urszula Czartoryska in: *Fotografia – mowa ludzka. Perspektywy teoretyczne*. Tom 2. Słowo Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2005, a picture of a salesperson signifies "all the 'salespeople'", an image showing a moment in the life of a factory is "generalized in the minds of the readers into hundreds of factories and their ceaseless production" [*trans mine*], pp. 80–81.

³⁶ S. Ronen, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

slips in the western world – “Polish.”³⁷ However, Jewish visual imagination constructing contemporary Poland *outside* the framework of the concept of Nazi death camps may pose an unexpected challenge to Polish-Jewish relations: when the concepts of Polishness and the camps become separated, the idea of Polish complicity in the Shoah becomes independent, and lodges itself within the concept of Polishness.

Images from Auschwitz exemplify the fact that the preconceptions held by the perceiver are a prism through which s/he represents what s/he perceives. The complexity of interpretation indicates the vicissitudes of analyzing representation and perception of Poland by foreign Jews, especially so when the analysis is conducted by a Pole and/or a Jew. It is, however, possible to say that the primacy among representations of Poland of meta-images of disintegrating synagogues, desecrated cemeteries, empty streets and death camps suggests the dominance of memories of Polish-Jewish past over actual encounters with Poland. The fact that photography does not allow a confrontation between the ready-made image and reality shows that, in Polish-Jewish dialogue, attention must be paid to a virtual inaccessibility for the Poles and the Jews of each other's images. Simultaneously, if and when Auschwitz functions as the unique or the main point of reference, one must bear in mind the fact that interpretations will reflect not so much what is interpreted, but the convictions entered into interpretations. While photography indicates the existence of a certain Jewish perception that conceives of Poland as *a space of memory*, it reveals, also, a challenge facing the Poles who must strive to teach themselves and aid their dialogic partners learn to turn to such perceptions of Polish-Jewish conversation that will relocate the speakers forward, into the context of the actual place and time in which the conversation is taking place.

³⁷ An example of one such “mistake” can be found in Margaret Olin’s article recounting the story of a boy who “survived a Polish death camp” (in: M. Olin, *Lanzmann’s Shoah, and the Topography of the Holocaust Film*, “Representations” (57) 1997, p. 11). The fact that Olin uses the expression “Polish death camp” cannot be explained by ignorance or linguistic carelessness, since her article deals with the visual and verbal representations of the Holocaust in its *topography*. The importance of such utterances is noted by the spokesman for American Jewish Committee, reminding “those who are either unaware of the facts or careless in their choice of words” that “[t]his is not a mere semantic matter. Historical integrity and accuracy hang in the balance” (in: *Statement on Poland and the Auschwitz Commemoration*, American Jewish Committee, January 30, 2005, (<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=ijIT12PHKOG&b=1531911&ct=873437>, accessed: 15.10.2011). See also (n.a.) *Yad Vashem for renaming Auschwitz*, “The Jerusalem Post”, May 11, 2006, [online] <http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=21552>, accessed: 15.09.2012).

S U M M A R Y

The article presents the rhetorics of visual imagery made in former German Nazi death camps in Poland by non-Polish Jewish professional photographers in the context of perceptions of Poland. The findings are presented in the form of a case study of Jeff Gusky's 2003 album *Silent Places* and Micha Bar-Am's 1989 collection of images entitled "Auschwitz camp 'victims' visit camp" published online by the *Magnum* agency. The methodology used takes advantage of Lotman and Uspieski's concept of the self-perpetuating and self-modifying "cultural machine". Most photographic representations of (museums of) Nazi death camps available in the media are culturally-constructed meta-images; others constitute attempts at creating visual accounts of individual and collective memories. The material analyzed reveals an absence of direct connection between the notion of the Shoah as present in photographic images of former death camps and the location of the camps in contemporary Poland. A tentative diagnosis of the relation between the meaning of "Poland" and "Polishness" in (the so-called Western) Jewish imagination and the concept of Nazi death camps is, thus, that Jewish visual imagination defines contemporary Poland outside the rhetorical framework of death camps. The idea of Polish complicity in the Shoah, however, is independent from the imagery of former death camps, and lodged in the concept of "Polishness" itself.

