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THE WORLD THAT CEASED TO EXIST. REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY OF CULTURE OF POLISH JEWS

Studying a culture that an anthropologist has not had a direct contact with is not a new phenomenon in our discipline. Already during World War II, a seminar of Ruth Benedict inspired papers whose authors were drawing from other, non-traditional sources, looking for materials that would replace a field interview or observation (Mead, Matraux, 1953). The papers written in the seminar concerned "inaccessible" cultures; the reasons why anthropologists were not able to conduct their research *in situ*, i.e. among the people they were interested, were of a political nature. The time of war created a specific situation; on the one hand, it was difficult to cross the border, but on the other, there was a need to acquire knowledge about societies that were either on the enemy's side or that were conquered. Because of the post-war division of the world, the methods applied in anthropological studies conducted at a distance were for some time still continued and improved, despite repeated criticism of the very essence of such studies and their purposes, and despite many objections concerning the employed methodology.

In time, the methods developed in that period became outdated, and studies conducted at a distance were discontinued. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that they provided grounds for a discussion about the possibilities of carrying out anthropological studies on cultures that ceased to exist at all as a result of a disaster caused by the war. This refers also to the possibility of studying the culture of Eastern European Jews.

The aftermath of the total extermination of Jewish people in the territory of Eastern Europe during World War II was not only that the people were killed, but also that to a large degree the material culture and the art that represented that culture vanished too. The task that the anthropologists interested in traditional Jewish culture had to face involved the development of methods which would permit reconstruction of what had been destroyed during the war. The task was the more difficult that in the period preceding the Holocaust, studies on traditional Jewish culture had only just begun

(Weinreich, 1959)[1]. The first thing to do was then to start an intensive search for all kinds of materials scattered outside the Jewish ethnographic literature on that subject (Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1988). Particular authors to a large extent relied on fiction in Yiddish which possessed a fair share of authenticity. The ethnographic photo archives were extended, and their goal was not only to collect old photo albums and family pictures, but also to copy the already published photographs that were of value for the ethnologist[2]. A campaign for the search for preserved works of art and culture was also organized, and is still continued by museums. Recently, a campaign for documenting the artifacts related to traditional Jewish art has been launched[3]. There is no doubt, however, that of all those sources of information about the traditional Jewish community the most essential is direct contact with respondents, and – if possible – with the area previously populated by the community. It should be emphasized that the Jewish community was closely linked with its traditional place of living. Such links, strengthened by many historical and religious reasons, on the one hand united the Jewish community, but on the other, separated it from the non-Jewish neighbors. In Eastern Europe, and primarily in Poland, all these processes led to the formation of a specific provincial Jewish culture whose model has been classified as a characteristic cultural unit among other traditional territorial groups. Hence, by using the commonly accepted name *shtetl*, we mean not so much a geographical area, a definite place, an Eastern European town, as it may be suggested by a literal translation of the word, but rather a Jewish community that lived there[4], a community of a specific structure, governed by its own, strictly defined laws which, on the one hand, resulted from particular historical processes, but on the other, remained subject to the commandments of Jewish religion.

A standard approach often taken by scholars interested in the Jewish town – which actually still seems valid – involves referring to the memory of those who survived the Holocaust. Such an approach, however, often faces many of obstacles that the contemporaries are not always aware of.

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[1] The publications which I am quoting in the present paper are certainly not the only ones pertaining to the problematic. I believe, however, that they are the most characteristic or contain the most interesting data.

[2] The largest one is in New York in the YIWO.

[3] The center of Jewish documentation of traditional art founded at Hebrew University in Jerusalem has in its archives descriptions and photographs of individual artefacts of all the Jewish groups of the diaspora and Israel, including Poland.

[4] The term *shtetl* that I am using here in reference to the Jewish town does not imply that I exclude the existence on the same territory of a Polish population next to the Jewish one. Still, such an approach is justified by the homogeneity of the Jewish community and separate laws that governed it.

Because of the tragedy of war only a few Jews from Eastern Europe have survived. Those who came back to their homeland for a longer period of time are exceptional, and we know only of few cases of Jews who decided to stay in the same town in which, they had lived before. There are many, mainly psychological, reasons for the above, which definitely reaches beyond the scope of this paper. The research on the residual traditional Jewish communities in Poland provides data about the mobility of Jews in the postwar period or about the development of new local groups in which, however, one should not look for traces of continuation of the tradition from before the war[5].

A large Jewish diaspora originating from the area of our interest to which the anthropologist automatically refers does not constitute a group of uniform cultural features – as it is assumed by most contemporary researches. On the contrary, this community is highly differentiated, and the differences are of various nature. It is very difficult to establish features that would unmistakably identify those differences; nevertheless, I will try to indicate the aspects which should not be neglected, especially since some of them are very helpful in evaluating the material presently obtained from respondents.

For the contemporary researches, a crucial issue is the time when his or her respondent left the area of our interest. Apart from such an obvious factor as the age at which he or she left, it is also necessary to identify and take into account the causes of displacement. Ideological reasons and involvement in the Zionist movement highly contributed to a more objective opinion about the Jewish population that stayed in Poland and its living conditions. Departure caused by the growing anti-Semitism or by hunger left wounds that were hard to heal and thus tinted the relations with subjectivism. The postwar emigration – in particular its later waves of 1956 and 1968 – mostly encompassed people engaged in the life of Polish society who only reluctantly recollect the period under investigation. The problem of objectivism or of the most often encountered idealization of the memories of one's youth, either conscious or even unconscious selection of these memories (Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1991), will be left outside the scope of the present paper.

To properly define the research problematic and, as a consequence, to obtain valid results, it is also important to take into account the place of settlement of the contemporary respondent. For the most part, Jews that live in the countries of diaspora, in particular in the United States or in South America, observe the tradition inherited from their countries of origin[6] and in

[5] This was proved by the field studies performed among the Jewish population belonging to a local religious group in Łódź. Most of its members settled down in this town after the war, yet the majority of them came from the area that now is outside Poland.

[6] Here we should be very careful and distinguish the studies on the transformation of traditional provincial culture in groups of the diaspora from those which aim at reproduction of the traditions observed in the town.

the first place, from the town they or their parents left behind. The communities living in Israel are engaged in this kind of activity to a much lesser extent. The reasons for rather ambivalent attitudes of the inhabitants of Israel to their past in the diaspora should be sought in their involvement in the problems of the state. Besides, already in the interwar period the Zionist emigration consciously reduced its ties with the country of origin, thus obeying one of the fundamental laws of its ideology which advocated breaking with the tradition, developing a new society, and building up a new country based on new and completely different laws. Such an approach to the past was continued in the period of formation and development of the state of Israel, which favored the unification of its inhabitants coming from many different parts of the world. The basic goal of many compatriots from Eastern European towns who were very active in Israel was to save Jewish communes from oblivion. This has been manifested first of all by publishing a book commemorating the past life in Europe (Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1991) and by organizing an event on the occasion of any anniversary of the extermination of a particular community to commemorate those who were killed. The main concern of the compatriots is to strengthen the ties among the former inhabitants of the town that presently live on different continents and to pass down to the children and grandchildren the memory of the native *shtetl*. However, most descendants are not interested in studying their family past[7].

Taking into account the stratification of Jewish communities, we should look for the traces of life in diaspora among the strata closer to tradition, i.e. primarily among the orthodox Jews. They cultivate knowledge of the language of diaspora, which is Yiddish, respect the traditional intragroup social strafification, wear the old clothing of Polish Jews and observe some elements of rituals brought from Eastern Europe. Without any doubt then it can be claimed that the Hasidic groups, both in Israel and in other countries of diaspora, continue some of the *shtetl* traditions contained in many aspects of their culture. Still, we must remember that such Jews form self-contained communities conforming to only one tradition, that of a definite Hasidic court, which displaces other, no less important and sometimes even richer, components of the *shtetl* culture. If we rely on the Hasidic tradition only, we will make an often committed mistake and overemphasize the importance of the contribution of the Hasidim to the global picture of life in the *shtetl* community. It should be stressed that the popular image of a town inhabited

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[7] Evidence in support of a lack of close interest in the former town includes the fact that, when asked about the place of origin of their parents, contemporary young people can often supply the name of the town, yet in most cases they are not aware where it actually was or is, whether it was big or small, etc. Only the recently started school trips of Israeli students to Poland have somewhat strengthened their ties with the place of origin of their parents.

exclusively by the Hasidim is simply wrong; in most cases it is based either on postwar literature or on mass media which in this way try to reconstruct the world of Polish Jews that perished. Undoubtedly, the Hasidic groups constituted the most distinct and colourful social communities, and as such they remained in the memory of their former neighbors, yet they were not the only inhabitants of a Jewish *shtetl*.

By referring to the memory of our informers we force them to reconstruct the world of their childhood and youth. As regards the settled society or immigrant groups that were for many reasons displaced some time ago, this reconstruction seems to be a relatively easy task. However, studying the Jewish community, we deal with a different problem. In this case, the recollection of the world of youth implies both the resurrection and extermination of this world, which is why it is not always possible. Right after the war many anthropologists had to give up their studies among the Jewish immigrants because the respondents were not able to recollect the world that had ceased to exist. Reluctance to remember the tragic past has been encountered by anthropologists even to the present.

Studying a culture that perished in reality, but exists in the memory inevitably imposes some restrictions on the topic under consideration. We must be aware of the impossibility of obtaining some data, of the deformations resulting from an ordinary process of idealization of one's past, of the stereotypization of the Eastern European Jewish tradition, and of the assumption by the respondents of the structural model of the Jewish town that was commonly accepted by fiction (Miron, 1981; Weissenberg, 1930), mass media or some anthropological studies (Zborowski, Herzog, 1953). A scholar should not ignore a frequently occurring phenomenon of subjection of the respondents to the influence of other traditional societies, which blurs the recollected picture of their hometown. Under the influence of their new societies the respondents tend to submit their own recollections to those derived from the stories of their present neighbors who in the past lived in a completely different region of Poland, yet now at the new place along with the respondent form a group of former residents of Eastern Europe.

Another factor that should be taken into account in a attempt to base our studies on a model most closely related to the Eastern European Jewish town, is that we also are subject to the process of mythologization. As we know, myths differ and they do not have to be complementary. The most common myth refers to the supposed dominance of Hasidic culture and its overwhelming influence on all walks of life in a *shtetl*. The Hasidic culture as the most colourful feature of the Jewish community that destinguished it most visibly from the neighbors has been most perspicuously preserved – as it was already mentioned – in the memory of non-Jews. A considerable charge of mysticism, so characteristic of the Hasidim, created in the Jewish tradition

a unique picture of the Hasidic community. A direct consequence of the above has been the myth of *shtetl* living in a state of ideal harmony, in accordance with the law of the Hasidic tradition fixed in Jewish fiction and in other arts such as film or theater. Beside this myth, there is also another one, widely known from literature (Weissenberg, 1930), which shows the poverty of a Jewish town and its hopeless life devoid of any prospects as well as the necessity to rebel against such a situation[8]. The third myth concerns the picture of a town created by *Księgi pamięci* [Books of Memory] (Goldberg--Mulkiewicz, 1991) which overemphasizes the significance of the activity of cultural and social organizations, in particular of youth groups cultivating the ideology of Zionism.

Defying the commonly accepted mythologization of the traditional *shtetl* and recognizing the need to collect materials from the respondents as quickly as possible, a few years after the war studies on the atlas of Jewish culture and language in Eastern Eurpe were launched; they were considered the most important and also the most possible kind of studies to carry out (Weinreich, 1960). That implied a shift of focus from a local Jewish community to a considerably larger group, including the core of the Ashkenazi Jewry as a whole[9].

The organizers of these studies, primarily conducted in the United States, relied on a valid assumption that the language of immigrants remained the most resistant to all kinds of influences that memory cannot resist. The results of these studies have significantly extended the scope of knowledge about the Jewish community in general. First of all, the studies provided grounds for finding out and presenting on maps not only the difference in the dialects of Yiddish, but also for formulating conclusions about regional differentiation of particular cultural phenomena as well as about family and annual rituals and traditional folk culture. Moreover, the results of the studies allowed the formulation of a hypothesis suggesting a new division of the Yiddish society into regional groups. They proved that the areas populated by Jews did not overlap with the boundaries that marked cultural differences among the non-Jewish inhabitants of the same area (Weinreich, 1962). It is regrettable that contemporary anthropologists very rarely use in their studies the data from this atlas, which are essential in research on larger areas. However, even dealing with territories of a smaller geographical range, we should not forget that the regional boundaries were often disturbed by the high mobility of the Hasidic communities. The Hasidim visiting the courts of their saintly rabbis which were sometimes very distant from one another met there inhabitants of

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[8] The conviction about common poverty of the Jewish masses in Poland before World War II has been lingering on till today in many countries of the diaspora.

[9] In time the studies have been expanded to include also the Askhenazi Jewry living in Europe.

other, often equally remote regions. From their gatherings, especially those related to holidays, they brought to their hometowns traditions celebrated in the courts of the rabbis along with elements of culture borrowed from their coreligionists from other parts of the country. This was manifested by popularization of traditional music of other regions, tales and legends constituting oral folklore, and the acceptance of individual components of different rituals or elements of traditional clothing, particularly of men.

Another field that was relatively slightly affected by outside influence and cultural transitions was oral folklore. This has been corroborated by the results of numerous studies conducted mainly by Jewish folklore scholars in Israel and in all countries of the diaspora. The folklore of Eastern European Jewry has been the subject of many papers and publications based on the preserved material. The aforementioned difficulties may also be encountered in other fields of research. For reasons already discussed, they become particularly significant when studies are conducted in Poland. Actually, the possibilities for studying the culture of Polish Jews are limited to just a few areas of research.

In the first place, it has been possible to study the stereotype of a Jew in the culture of Polish peasants. Research on this subject is mainly based on direct field studies, nowadays conducted among the non-Jewish population (Cała, 1987) or on available sources that were not yet processed by ethnologists. (Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1980; Jastrzębski, 1989). We should, however, constantly keep in mind what is unfortunately not always respected in many publications, that contemporary studies, and particularly field studies, are implicated in the general conditions governing the process of stereotype formation. Apart from the problem of emotional involvement of the anthropologists in the evaluation of material, scholars should not forget about the many different factors that affect the process of stereotype development in general, and in particular the stereotype of a Jew in Poland (Irwin-Zarecka, 1988).

Material-based studies whose authors aim at thorough examination of specific problems of material culture or artistic handicraft have to draw from former ethnographic publications, the already existing museum collections (Frankel, 1975; Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1976) or from published or unpublished field materials collected for other reasons, which contain interesting data relevant to the conducted study (Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1983).

The centuries-long coexistence of the Polish and Jewish culture on the same territory created conditions conducive to mutual borrowings. The first to show interest in this problematic were folklore specialists on Polish and Polish-Ukrainian cultures (Franko, 1892)[10] as well as on Jewish culture (Sadan,

[10] I do not think it is necessary to quote the all extensive literature on that subject, as I consider I. Franko's work as the most representative in this respect.

1980)[11]. Later anthropologists extended their interests to include rituals and folk art (Fryś-Pietraszkowa, 1989; Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1989). Nonetheless, it seems to me that mutual borrowings have not yet been fully explored. Enriching our knowledge with more data will undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of many aspects of both cultures[12].

It is really surprising how few objects of the traditional Jewish culture have been preserved. The limits of this article do not permit consideration of the reasons for this phenomenon, yet we must be aware that the material basis that a contemporary ethnographer has at his or her disposal is very scarce[13]. Quite often the museum or private collections that ethnographers may use lack the most fundamental documentation concerning the function of a given object, its provenance, and the name of the maker and owner. One should also remember that such objects were frequently moved from place to place, even at the time when they still functioned in the Jewish culture. They often travelled even outside the country where they were made, which was the case of elements of the dowry or components of synagogue furnishing and decoration, often ordered in faraway places. Most often even the prewar collections do not have appropriate documentation. Coming after the war across a Jewish cult object in a local antique shop did not necessarily have to imply that it came from the local area.

The only valid exceptions are cemeteries and the remaining synagogues bearing the traces of the original decoration or houses that are used for ritual purposes or in which Jews dwelled in the past. That group of objects, however, is predominantly the subject of interest of art historians. Particularly rich are the collections of tombstones found in Jewish cemeteries which are now being taken care of by restorers or individual museums. The preserved inscriptions and bas-reliefs decorating the tombstones, which are often of great artistic value, may provide a significant amount of information. Unfortunately, the research in this field has practically just begun and thus far has not reached beyond the initial stage of documentation. The popularization of basic meanings of Jewish symbols related to the tombs undoubtedly fosters interest in Jewish culture in general, which does not, however, equal a systematic study of this culture.

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[11] The article was written and published earlier in Hebrew, but I am quoting from its English version. It is not the only article of this author who in all his works expressed much interest in the problem of the Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish cultural frontier.

[12] This problem has been thoroughly and in an interesting way covered by Eugenia Prokop-Janiec (1992) who, in the basis of the Polish-Jewish literature produced between the world wars, showed the richness of the problematic involved in the study of the cultural frontier.

[13] The reasons for this state of affairs were discussed in my paper devoted to the beginning of the studies on the ethnography of Polish Jews and to the Jewish problematic in studies written in Polish (Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, 1986).

In conclusion, we must agree with an assumption that the study of the traditional culture of Polish Jews is possible, yet it requires both thorough preparation and the compliance of the anthropologist with limitations that cannot be surmounted.

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