Can there be a conciliatory heritage?
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The scholarship on heritage has been preoccupied with discussions of conflict and discord. But might heritage not also be deployed for conciliatory functions after national trauma? Kazimierz, the historical Jewish district of Cracow, Poland is a unique urban space whose recent Jewish-themed development both reflects and extends grassroots Polish–Jewish relationship building in the post-Holocaust, post-Communist era. It is one of the few sites in the world today where (non-Polish) Jews and (non-Jewish) Poles regularly encounter one another. Based on the everyday interactions and understandings of local participants, rather than top-down memorial schemes or official proclamations of the achievement or expectation of reconciliation, this paper considers heritage spaces and landscapes as key sites for conciliatory civil society development through meaningful engagement with difficult histories.

Keywords: Jewish culture; memory; Poland; reconciliation; heritage tourism; Holocaust

Public spaces … can be sites of reconciliation between strangers who are wary of, but curious about, each other.

― Elaine Gurian (2004, p. 89)

[C]ultural tourism becomes simply life-enhancing rather than life-consuming, not a spectacle but an experience, because real people still live it and share it with real people who interpret it. We are able to experience reciprocity and feel enriched by it.

― Stuart Hannabuss (2000, pp. 363–364)

Remembering well requires reopening wounds in a particular way, one which people cannot do by themselves; remembering well requires a social structure in which people can address others across the boundaries of difference.

― Richard Sennett (1998, p. 22)

‘Why would a Pole open a Jewish bookstore?’ Jewish visitors ask. A non-Jewish Jewish bookstore would be cause enough for suspicion. But a Polish one? This combination violates the basic order of a Jewish universe built from grandparents’ stories of deceitful Poles turning over Jews to the Nazis for vodka.

Zdzislaw Les is the owner of the Jarden Jewish Bookshop in Cracow, Poland. He recalls his inspiration for opening the shop:

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I visited this normal bookshop, in this very building, in which sat two boring women selling crime stories and third-class literature. And there was one shelf, maybe two small shelves, on which was written ‘Judaica.’ Ten titles! And I asked them, ‘Do you know where you are?’ I thought it was a scandal, and I told these women so. So I took it over, threw out the other 90 percent of the books, and began to increase the Judaica. And now I have about 150 titles – in practice, all of what is published in Poland. And it is the only Jewish bookshop in Poland.¹

Zdzislaw used to direct Cracow’s House of Culture, the omnipresent communist-era centre for community arts and cultural ideology, where he introduced a series called ‘Meetings with Jewish Culture’. There were gatherings with authors of books, concerts of Jewish songs, and other events. At university, Zdzislaw trained as a Slavicist. He attributes much of his sensitivity about Jewish influences on Polish culture to his familiarity with Polish literature. He pokes fun at Polish nationalism and says that many of Poland’s cultural heroes were actually Jews. He always has an example up his sleeve:

I don’t know if you know that the best Polish poet of the twentieth century was Jewish. Boleslaw Lesmian. And the best master of Polish language. Many Polish poets in the twentieth century were Jews: Tuwim, Lesmian, Slonimski. And they created, I think, more variety in poetry than others. In Polish poetry ... Isn’t that a paradox? And some others fields, history for example, science. Maybe our stupid nationalists will finally understand that Polish folklore, which makes them have an orgasm, owes Jews a lot, and that their favourite potato pancakes are also a Jewish recipe, that our so-called folk art was also inspired by Jews and this dumb nation was only copying what they invented. So consider this: if so many Jews have done so much for Polish culture, why shouldn’t two poor Poles like us do something for Jews?

Converging memory projects

The Jarden Jewish bookshop is located in Kazimierz, a rare medieval Jewish quarter that survived World War II intact. Until the early 1990s, however, it was a largely empty, dilapidated part of Cracow. The most obvious evidence of hundreds of years of Jewish habitation were the many dilapidated or re-purposed synagogues and entrance ways with visible impressions of mezuza (small receptacles containing a biblical text traditionally affixed to door frames) that had been wrenched away in the wake of the brutal removal of the Jews by the Nazis. While Kazimierz is no longer a neighbourhood inhabited by Jews, fashionable Jewish-themed cafés and shops, run by ethnic Poles, now line the main square, beckoning customers with signs in Hebrew and Yiddish, and offering ‘Jewish’ food, decor, and music.

To extend Zdzislaw’s rhetorical question: just what are these Poles doing for Jews, and why? Many foreign Jews have a ready answer. These ‘poor Poles’ are not doing anything for Jewish culture, quite the opposite. They are skimming what is fashionable and marketable from Jewishness while uninterested in and unconnected to actual Jews, who are conveniently absent. Simply put, the notion ‘that preservation of the Jewish heritage of Poland lies partly in Christian hands ... strike[s] some people as preposterous at best, and, at worst, in extremely bad taste’ (Hoffman 1995, p. 276).

Yet contrary to the widespread view that interest in Jewish heritage in Poland today is merely a superficial fad, I suggest that its expression in Kazimierz is in important ways the result of two subaltern memory projects – a local Polish one and a foreign Jewish one, imported by tourism. The Polish project is meaningfully contiguous with activist projects rooted in Poland’s struggle for democracy. In the
1970s and 1980s under late communism, grassroots interest in and activities on behalf of Jews represented a form of resistance against the government, which periodically wielded anti- (or occasionally philo-) Semitism as a political tool, but otherwise tightly censored Jewish themes. This ‘Jewish memory project’ was also interconnected with Jewish de-assimilation and community revival in Poland. A highly dialogic project, non-Jewish Poles made crucial contributions to restoring Jewish heritage (Gebert 1994). As sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka notes, ‘[i]t would often be from these Catholic friends that a Jew brought up in silence learned some basics of Judaism and Jewish history’ (Irwin-Zarecka 1989, pp. 90–91).

Since the early 1990s in post-communist Poland, non-Jewish ‘heritage brokers’ in Kazimierz have played key roles in cultivating conditions for the flowering and ferment of Polish-Jewish culture. While not all were idealistically motivated, neither have most of their projects been singularly mercenary. Rather, as has been suggested of culture brokering projects elsewhere, they may be better understood as representing ‘an honour, a responsibility, and something that can sometimes be turned to personal advantage and profit’ (Kurin 1997, p. 39). In publicly affirming Jewish culture, key brokers took social risks that the few, mostly old, remaining local Jews were unable or unwilling to take. As international Jewish tourism and local Jewish confidence have grown, these brokers have been open to, and courted, Jewish involvement in their endeavours.

Conversely, while facing the Holocaust is a key component in most foreign Jewish travel to Poland, a growing minority seeks more than an experience of evil. A memory project developing among foreign Jews has drawn some to confront and re-consider their own community’s refusal of Poland as a relevant part of Jewish heritage beyond the heritage of destruction. Thus, while a Polish urge to remember and reconcile with its Jewish heritage has been a prime mover in Kazimierz’s development as a ‘conciliatory heritage’ site, individual Jewish quests to come to terms with Poland’s broader Jewish heritage have played an integral complementary role. As Amos, a French Jew in his early 20s, told me while sitting in Café Ariel, one of Kazimierz’s key Jewish-themed venues:

People come here [to Poland] and say ‘It is awful, it is awful.’ I say, ‘No’. I don’t come here to say it is awful. I just come to make peace with people. To not say, ‘Okay, [see], it is anti-Semitic.’ To try [instead] to make peace, and to make a place for that in my head … It was really nice to try to speak with Polish people without getting … I didn’t want to go back to Poland to see anti-Semitism. I want to stop this.

While these emerging memory projects follow multiple pathways, Kazimierz is unique as a social catchment with an inherent genius loci that brings these projects into constant, meaningful contact. Over a 15-year span, I saw the Polish and Jewish projects not only converge, but intertwine, catalyse and refine each other in Kazimierz. The result is an evolving Polish-Jewish heritage site, a ‘conciliatory’ space that works against more conflictive notions of Poland’s Jewish heritage – dominant in both Jewish and Polish society – that pit Jewishness and Polishness against one another.

Towards a conciliatory heritage

The second issue involves discussions of reconciliation. A central aspect of managing the past among members of aggrieved groups in the wake of massive political changes in transitional societies involves encounters of truth telling and listening, and much has been written on the successes – and increasingly the failures – of official, legal structures and processes put in place by transitional governments to facilitate such encounters (Minow 1999, Hayner and Garton Ash 2002, Bilbija et al. 2005). But ‘reconciliation’, if it is to be meaningful, is not achieved in one fell swoop; it is an organic process that unfolds in daily life, within and between aggrieved communities. Yet ‘few authors have addressed the critical dimension of what must happen between people to lead to genuine rehumanization’ (Halpern and Weinstein 2004, p. 305). Anthropologist John Borneman (2002, pp. 289, 293) has suggested that the courtroom is only one, highly formalised, site for such exchanges and that alternative sites and other ‘potential listeners/practitioners of listening’ should be considered. I take up his suggestion here by proposing, as one such alternative, heritage landscapes and the culture brokers who tend them. My observations in Kazimierz suggest this is a rich domain.

The third discussion surrounds ‘sites of memory’. Pierre Nora’s notion of ‘lieux de memoire’ has inspired much writing on the cultural ‘memory work’ such sites do. But much of the scholarship seems to take for granted Nora’s bifurcation of purely symbolic, historicised, alienated ‘lieux’ from ‘milieux’ – the more ancestral, living, embodied ‘environments’ of (supposedly pre-modern) memory, transmitted via ‘gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories’ (Nora 1989, p. 13). Thus cultural studies of memory sites often limit themselves to a focus on representations or discursive identity constructions, overlooking more social, embodied practices of memory that sites may entail or inspire, through encounter, dialogue, network building, cultural activism and preservation, or even ‘love’ (Domínguez 2000).

Viewing Kazimierz at the intersection of these overlapping gaps, I argue that the quarter in its recent incarnation is more than an evocative site for the projection and reception of representations of Jewish heritage, which can then be read as texts – finished surfaces to deconstruct for hidden meanings, ideologies and assertions of power. Rather, I see Kazimierz as a unique opening in which Jews and Poles regularly cross paths, offering a rare opportunity for geographically dissociated groups to experience ‘the face-to-face encounter that has traditionally grounded the ethical’ (Rothberg 2000, p. 271).

The result is a unique arena in which Jewish and Polish collective memories and national identities can be confronted, questioned, and expanded. To be clear, my goal is not to suggest that Jewish heritage practice in Poland – or even in Kazimierz – is in some essential way conciliatory, only that it can be, both in its motivations and its reception. Because of the frequent, easy dismissal of Kazimierz as a ‘Jewish Disneyland’ – a type of site that social analysts have characterised as a totalising environment that reproduces normative identifications and constrains social interactions (e.g. Kuenz 1993) – central to my project is to show how this heritage site embodies counter-hegemonic political and moral concerns as well.

Jewish Poland as conflictual heritage

The uniqueness and activist quality of the notion of a hybrid ‘Polish-Jewish’ heritage – as illustrated by Zdzisław’s statement above – must be understood in the context of the troubled symbolic landscape that Polish–Jewish relations were
Reduced to after the horrors of the Holocaust. This includes the immediate post-war years in which the few surviving Polish Jews were often seen and acted upon as unwanted foreigners, as well as the later communist-government-sponsored anti-Semitic campaigns that emptied Poland almost entirely of Jews and Jewish social and memorial infrastructure. Whether today there exists a Polish-Jewish heritage – and what that heritage consists of – is a matter of popular dispute. In the post-war period a divorce of Polish and Jewish memory occurred – Polish national memory was re-articulated by Catholic Poles, Jewish memory of Poland by Jews now largely residing elsewhere. This split was perpetuated and reinforced by communist and ethno-national heritage practices within both the Polish and foreign Jewish communities (Wrobel 1997, Polonsky and Michlic 2004). New scholarship, in publications tellingly titled *Contested Memories* (Zimmerman 2003) and *Imaginary Neighbors* (Glowacka and Zylinska 2007), illustrates contending frames of reference and charged symbolic engagements in which incommensurable Jewish and Polish national narratives of martyrology come head to head, particularly around the very sites of the Nazi genocide machinery (Kapralski 2002, Zubrzycki 2006).

On the Polish side, the priorities of the post-war communist state and the demands of Polish nationalism made the heritage of Poland’s longstanding Jewish community invisible, unwanted, or irrelevant to what had become a mono-ethnic (Catholic) Polish nation. While the Jewish past has become increasingly relevant in present-day, post-communist Poland, particularly in the international diplomatic arena, its grassroots significance is shifting, uneven and multi-valent. In the Jewish communal world outside of Poland the hegemonic answer to the corresponding question of whether the Jewish people have a Polish heritage that extends beyond their near-demise during the Holocaust remains a resounding ‘No’. The majority of Jewish visitors to Poland visit primarily Holocaust-related sites, often continuing on (or returning) to Israel. These visits are frequently embedded in a form of state- and community-sponsored memory work that uses these countries as a stage to enact a Zionist-inflected pageant of national death and redemption, with an attendant either/or understanding of Polishness and Jewishness.

The polarisation of Jewish and Polish national visions of Poland’s Jewish heritage is highlighted by comparing two maps – one from an Israeli tourist agency specialising in youth tours to Poland and one from the Polish National Tourist Board. Both maps show the contours of today’s Polish state territory and are identically titled ‘Jewish Heritage in Poland’. But the keys for each map – and the corresponding density of sites denoted – are strikingly different. While the Israeli map indicates only Nazi ghettos and extermination camps, the Polish map lists a range of historical Jewish locations, including key sites of Holocaust atrocity, but also synagogues, Hasidic centres and other sites of Jewish life.

These fixed, divergent representations serve as a backdrop on which to view the rise of – and possibilities represented by – grassroots Jewish heritage initiatives, and the potential for new public formation in the dynamic social spaces these create. Discussions of Polish–Jewish relations focus overwhelmingly on the conflicting historical narratives of the Polish-Jewish past and the way in which those narratives frequently animate such relations. But sites of physical and intangible heritage, while often employed for exclusivist or bigoted national imaginings, can also become ‘sites of conscience’ (Sevcenko 2002). These facilitate interpersonal engagements and social risk-taking (telling/listening, expressing dissent, creating productive discomfort); the production of new social networks; reflexive learning, and identification.
experimentation. Such spaces provide a unique framework for working through the emotional, social and cultural detritus of the Holocaust in Poland.

Asymmetrical vectors of reconciliation

Jews and Poles were ‘unequal victims’ of Nazi crimes (Gutman and Krakowski 1986), and the Nazis also encouraged Poles to participate in Jewish persecution and profit from Jewish expropriation, which recent historical scholarship suggests they did to a greater extent than previously acknowledged, both during and after the war (Gross 2001, Engelking 2003, Grabowski 2004, Stola 2005). Compounding the injury, the communist-era Polish state generally declined to acknowledge the Holocaust – the disproportional persecution and uniquely motivated attempt to exterminate the Jews – as distinct from the more general, brutal occupation of Poland and attendant persecution of ethnic Poles. While Holocaust consciousness has been publicly cultivated in the post-communist era in new monument inscriptions, the popular media and school history textbooks, so too has Poland’s national narrative of martyrology and resistance – in which Jews play an ambivalent role (perceived at turns as competitors for victim status, communism-embracing traitors and tarnishers of Polish heroism).

On the Jewish side, Holocaust consciousness (in which Poles play a role primarily as Nazi collaborators and Poland functions as the ground zero of Jewish extermination) has grown in significance with the communal battle against assimilation and waning
identification with the Zionist project. Jewish Holocaust commemoration has tended to extract the Jewish experience from its larger wartime context, and from the fate and suffering of Poland in particular. Indeed, political scientist Claire Rosenson cites recent survey data suggesting that while Poles are very much aware of the victimisation of the Jews in World War II and believe it is necessary to remember the Holocaust, ‘how many Jews can say anything at all about Polish losses during the war or even describe their situation under Nazi occupation? In my experience, many Jews are not even able to say whether Poland was an ally or opponent of the Nazis’ (Rosenson 1997, p. 67).

Since shortly after World War II, Poles and Jews have not (in any significant numbers) shared a physical territory, let alone any sense of ‘us’. Unlike, for example, black and white South Africans or conflicted citizens of Latin American countries, Polish–Jewish reconciliation has not been necessary, as the two groups no longer inhabit the same geographical space. In each side’s narrative of victimhood, the other has served mostly to illustrate the first side’s heroism or its own incomparable suffering. The resulting scenario is aptly captured by anthropologist Jack Kugelmass’
statement that ‘Jews see Poles as witnesses, if not outright accomplices, to murder; Poles see Jews as ingrates’ (Kugelmass 1995, p. 295).

Hybrid physical and social space

Two generations of Poles and Jews have had almost no contact with each other. Most Jews come to Kazimierz because it is on the way to Auschwitz. Through the mid-1990s I knew many Jewish visitors who arrived in Cracow only to go directly by bus or taxi to the Holocaust’s central symbol, returning the way they came. Those few particularly informed or with specific ancestral ties that brought them to Kazimierz would wander among crumbling facades bearing an occasional trace of flaking Hebrew lettering. Such visitors were struck primarily by the sense of Jewish absence, ‘particularly visible, since in spite of the destructive force of the war, the cultural landscape and urban fabric had survived’ (Murzyn 2006, p. 120). Decades of economic stagnation made it appear as if time had stopped in the near aftermath of destruction, leaving a monument to the apocalypse. For local Poles, even the Jewish identity of the quarter had been lost; Cracovians knew it only as a slum.

Today’s gentrifying Kazimierz is strikingly different. Local heritage brokers have used the site to create Jewish space of a particular kind, beyond what Cracow’s tiny ‘official’ local Jewish community has been able or willing to provide. The venues that comprise this space – often advertised as ‘Jewish sites’ in guidebooks – have formed centres of gravity for Jewish travellers, and have been transformative for provincial and Cracovian Jews seeking places to assemble. But per historian Diana Pinto (2002, p. 251), just as such ‘Jewish space’, cannot exist without Jews … neither can it exist only with them, for the space is not the equivalent of a community. It is an open cultural and even political agora where Jews intermingle with others qua Jews, and not just as citizens. It is a virtual space, present anywhere Jews and non-Jews interact on Jewish themes or where a Jewish voice can make itself felt.

Pinto calls such space the ‘the crown jewel’ of a pluralist democracy (Pinto 2002, p. 251). Exceeding artifice or veneer – but also exceeding the bounds of Jewish community – Kazimierz venues have catalysed a range of encounters and reckonings around Jewish heritage.

Kazimierz is today perceived by local Jews as a safe space, free from widespread Polish suspicion and prejudice about Jews. Journalist Ruth Gruber noted that ‘[t]he district consciously forms a sort of “Jewish zone” where different rules from the rest of the city – or country – may apply’ (Gruber 2003, p. 364). Further, Kazimierz possesses what Konstanty Gebert, a key figure in Poland’s Jewish communal revival living in Warsaw, called ruach (Hebrew for ‘spirit’), which makes it a favoured place for Jews from across Poland to come and ‘be Jewish’. Not only do many Polish Jews feel it to be a rare place in Poland where one can wear a yarmulke [skullcap] openly, but as Stanislaw Krajewski (a prominent figure in the Polish-Jewish community) told me, it is a place ‘where it feels more proper to wear one than not’.

Similarly, Kazimierz venues are perceived by many as a living space in what visiting foreign Jews otherwise encounter largely as a landscape of death. Wójciech Ornat, owner of the quarter’s first and most locally beloved Jewish restaurant, told me he opened his Jewish café in Kazimierz to counteract what he saw as the quarter’s emptiness and sadness. One year ago, tourists saw only death. Now, with Café
Ariel, they see life.' An American Jewish professor who asked me for help in arranging an educational trip echoed those sentiments, telling me her group’s meal and concert at Ariel ‘was a highlight of our trip – the first time after visiting concentration camps and cemeteries that the participants experienced Jewish life, not Jewish death’.

Indeed, Kazimierz’s liveliness and popularity has led it to become a space of social networking. Foreign Jews (particularly Westerners) have been sources of information, resources, meaning, and even legitimisation of Jewish identity for many – especially young – Polish Jews. Michal, a Polish Jew in his early 20s, noted the importance of visiting Kazimierz for ‘meet[ing] people with whom I have an emotional connection. Even if I’ve never talked to them. I see them each week [on Shabbat] and I know they’re like me [tacy jak ja]. They have the same problems. I know that I’m not alone.’

Even older members of the tiny local community, who tend to mistrust much of the new Jewishness Kazimierz has suddenly sprouted, have nevertheless extended their social space to include some of these venues. Such old-timers developed the habit of visiting Café Ariel every Shabbat to enjoy the specially made challah and coffee that Ornat provides for them at no charge. Folklorist Eve Jochnowitz (1998, p. 226) noted, ‘As soon as it opened, Ariel became the centre of all non-ceremonial Jewish activity in Cracow.’

Jonah Bookstein, a young American Jew from Detroit whom I met in Cracow in 1992 and who years later became the director of the Polish offices of the Ronald Lauder Foundation in Warsaw, was deeply involved in the early revival of Jewishness in Cracow. Together with late local Jew Henryk Halkowski – an institution in himself – Jonah organised many Jewish cultural and religious events at Café Ariel, like parties for Chanukah and Israeli independence day. ‘There were lots of guests; it was really fun. Jewish and non-Jewish both. Probably half and half.’ He maintains that, what Wojtek [Ornat, Ariel’s owner] and Gosia [his wife] did contributed so much to the Jewish atmosphere in Kazimierz, and in a very positive way. Jewish people felt comfortable – whatever Jewish community is there – and it’s small – felt comfortable going to Ariel. That was the first time in who knows how long that you got guys from shul – these old [guys] coming from the shul and going to sit at a café! I think that was a very significant thing.

Mateusz, a Polish-Catholic student also present at the dawn of Café Ariel shared the sense of excitement about the experience and the people he met:

I was selling books there. And I was very happy, I was just sitting there and reading the books, having some free cookies and Coca-Cola, and listening to the bands, every night, with Jewish music and there were a lot of American Jews, Israeli Jews [Jews from England, Holland, France], it was like, a lot of Jews! It was like, a great place to be.

Heritage brokers as an interface

Heritage brokers form a ‘front line’ of local contact for visiting Jews; indeed, they may be the only locals that Jewish visitors meet. Thus they act as hosts, forming a key ‘interface’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, p. 374) through which the symbolic meaning of heritage sites is produced, encountered, and understood – and one that has evolved in response to visitor input.

Jewish visitors often wander into the Jarden Jewish Bookshop with a vague air of confusion, blinking as they leave the brightness of the square for the cool dimness that
lies beyond the metre-thick stone walls of the Landau Palace that houses it. Once inside, they gaze up at the shelves of Jewish books, wooden Jewish figurines, and political posters (All different, All equal; 1 = 1, Intolerance = 0) and then down at bearded Zdzislaw, or Lucyna with her menorah earrings. They often seem unsure of what to make of this unanticipated array. Zdzislaw calls the bookshop ‘a kind of club’. He told me,

This isn’t just a place where we sell books. Because tourists come and they ask us questions. Also inhabitants of Cracow come here and we talk with them. It was even shocking for us; people who write doctoral dissertations come here. They come here for scholarly consultations. Even if we don’t have [a book] they ask us where in the world it exists. The tourists … don’t just ask about the War, the Holocaust. They think we’re some sort of information centre for Jews in Poland. They expect that of us.

Small daily gestures suggest a desire on the part of non-Jewish heritage brokers for Jewish input, belying accusations that Kazimierz promulgates a static portrait of an idealised, ahistorical culture. While nostalgia is certainly among the forces at play, its sources are multidirectional, coming as much from visiting Jews as local Poles (Lehrer 2003). The result is an active dialogue about the past. For example, while Café Ariel had been using recipes provided by Róża Jakubowicz, the late matriarch of Jewish Cracow (and mother of Tadeusz Jakubowicz, the president of Cracow’s official Jewish community), ‘Jewish grandmothers’ from abroad critique these, telling Ornat in no uncertain terms how a kugel, cholent, or dish of chopped liver should be made (Jochnowitz 1998, p. 227). He welcomes their input, even seeking out visiting Jews for impromptu cooking sessions in the café’s kitchen, and has tinkered with his dishes accordingly.

An example with broader impact is Cracow’s annual Jewish Cultural Festival. The festival was started in 1988 by a couple of Poles with a few Jewish films and an intense curiosity about the culture they depicted. Today, it is an international event that draws 25,000 people over nine days to experience everything from Hassidic dancing and Jewish cooking to Yiddish and Hebrew language lessons, from lectures on religious and current political topics to world-class live music, culminating in a final outdoor concert in Kazimierz’s main square that draws thousands of revellers and is broadcast nationwide on Polish television. It was through early encounters with Jewish musicians from abroad that Janusz Makuch, the festival’s founding director, became ‘aware that [Jewish] culture was alive, and important for many people … that despite the Holocaust, there was a flow, a continuity of that culture’, and that an entirely gentile Jewish cultural festival seemed inappropriate (Gruber 2003, pp. 365–366). Over the 20 years of the festival’s development, Makuch has also moved away from ‘nostalgic’ themes of shtetl and klezmer to include avant-garde Jewish culture and current debates on Polish-Jewish history coming out of Europe, Israel and the United States.

Organic sites of truth-telling and listening

Many scholars have noted that audience is crucial in acts of storytelling or testimony, especially in the context of Holocaust survivor narratives (Young 1988, Plank 1989, Langer 1993, Greenspan 1998). ‘Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener’, and for the teller, the listener may be ‘somebody they have been waiting for a long time’ (Laub 1992, p. 70). While much of this work focuses on formal interview situations, I observed the same dynamics when survivors or their descendants told their stories impromptu in the informal setting of Kazimierz’s ‘Jewish’ venues. This
suggests the need to broaden our understanding of ‘testimony’ and where it can take place. Especially with the institutionalisation of survivor testimony collection projects, telling typically occurs in pre-arranged situations or official settings. But testimony may find more spontaneous outlets in less abstracted sites that evoke memory in vital, organic ways, in environments or landscapes whose sociality and physicality allows stories to ‘stick’, creating the conditions for new communities of listeners (Casey 1987).

One important category of listener for Jewish stories is other Jews with similar experiences. There is a kind of un-alienation, a collective ingathering and re-embrace of lost or suppressed memory and experience that represents an internal, intra-Jewish reconciliation with the Jewish-Polish past. Barry Spielman of Tel Aviv wrote of ‘the very special attraction’ that Kazimierz’s main square held for him. He noted that people from all over the world ‘gravitated to this spot because they needed something’, to ‘find some solace’. He called Café Ariel ‘a sort of meeting place … a magnet, attracting all sorts of people’, and mentioned by name certain locals and perennial visitors:

My uncle David, an Auschwitz survivor, immediately struck up a conversation with [another survivor who visits Kazimierz frequently]. Meanwhile my father was engaged in conversation with a white-haired gentleman from Israel who was also originally from Cracow. It turned out that they actually knew each other, and they went on reminiscing for quite a while. Could this be the reason people come back here? (Spielman 2000, pp. 11–12)

Kazimierz also attracts non-Jewish Poles eager for – although often anxious about – an encounter with Jewishness. Visiting Jews often seemed drawn to tell stories of their wartime experiences, or their inherited pain, to ethnic Poles – particularly stories of pain caused by Poles. Visiting Jews’ desire to tell difficult stories may be read on some level as a test of Polish empathy, engagement, and willingness to listen. An American-Jewish woman complained to Zdzislaw after taking the Jarden bookshop’s Schindler’s List tour that the guide, when they stopped at the nearby Plaszow concentration camp site, had said that ‘only 20,000 Jews’ had been imprisoned there. The woman was very upset and argued with the guide. Later, Zdzislaw chastised the guide. ‘You stupid man!’ he said,

Every half intelligent Pole knows that the situation of Jews and Poles was incomparable. For Jews, Plaszow was only a stopping place on the way to Auschwitz. It is not our job to argue this [numbers] question with our customers. This is a question for historians. We must provide a service for these very sensitive people.

Despite the fact that the guide may actually have erroneously inflated rather than downplayed the number of Jews interned at the Plaszow camp (and that the Jewish visitor may have inflated it even more), Zdzislaw here highlights the distinct difference of character in the overall fates of Poles and Jews during the war – that Jews were singled out for extermination as a group. More significantly, whereas in Poland a narrative of ethnic Polish wartime martyrology is hegemonic, Zdzislaw sees his role as being sensitive to the primacy of the Holocaust framework for visiting Jews.

**Intersubjectivity – uncomfortable encounters with difference**

Encounters between visitors and locals may prompt reconsideration of received understandings of Jewishness, Polishness and anti-Semitism, as well as epistemological
reflection about the sources of one’s own knowledge. The mere confrontation with Poles positively engaged with Jewish heritage can be a ‘reality-rearranging’ experience for Jewish visitors. Visiting Jews are often taken aback – whether pleased, angry, or ambivalent – by non-Jewish tour guides or shop employees deeply involved with and educated in Jewish ritual, history and even languages (not infrequently to an extent greater than the visiting Jews to whom they cater). As Michael Traison, an American-Jewish lawyer involved with Jewish initiatives in Kazimierz told me, ‘There, some Gentiles know so much about Jewish traditions that they’re almost part of the community’.

An exchange between a visiting American-Jewish mother and daughter I interviewed in Kazimierz illustrates how the encounter with heritage brokers can provoke deep questions:

**Mother:** We definitely keep asking, and we keep saying to ourselves, ‘Do you think she’s Jewish? Do you think the proprietor of that place is Jewish?’ Every time we go in anywhere – we’ve sort of learned now that the answer is no. But particularly our first few days here [we kept wondering], ‘Is our guide Jewish? Can you tell if he’s Jewish? Does he have a Jewish name? Would he have said something already?’

**Daughter:** But then again, what does it mean to be Jewish? That he doesn’t self-identify as a Jew? I still think he could have had a Jewish grandparent but just wasn’t telling us. So it’s clearly … identity isn’t very clear … [W]e have a much more complex view as a result of this trip, wouldn’t you say that? Of Polish history, of Polish-Jewish relations. Much more complex. And I think we found it stunning that a young woman like Janina [their non-Jewish tour guide] would be so interested.

Confronting Jewishness configured in unfamiliar ways prompted self-questioning about identity and identification, genealogy and participation.

Yet Jewish tourists are not passive recipients of narratives and information – however conciliatory – provided by Polish guides. In a ‘personal seizure and appropriation of the narrative resources made available by tourism’ (Hartman 2002, p. 769), visiting Jews often resist their Polish guides, challenging them openly, whispering disapprovingly to fellow travellers or silently doubting the guides’ information. Sometimes Jewish visitors simply commandeered the tours. Malgorzata, a 21-year-old Polish guide from the Jarden Jewish Bookshop, was compelled to yield her prepared narrative to her client’s recitation of her grandfather’s memoir – and voiced enthusiasm about this development. ‘I never thought I’d meet someone with such a story!’ said Malgorzata, adding that she is always learning more about Kazimierz from Jewish tourists. Another guide, Marta, echoed appreciation of such ‘teaching’ by Jewish visitors, ‘because sometimes they know more than I do, so sometimes they correct me. It’s really good’. (Marta eventually converted to Judaism, and moved to Israel to marry).

Of course the interactions are not always pleasant. Jewish tourists at times make use of a ‘captive’ Polish audience to curse Polish ground. One man stood in the bookshop, loudly explaining the brevity of his visit. ‘One day is more than enough among these stinkende Wilde Chayes’ (Yiddish for ‘stinking wild animals’). Many heritage brokers in Kazimierz have learned to allow space for this kind of reaction, rather than becoming defensive, which only exacerbates the conflict. But there are other approaches. Jarden co-owner Lucyna, whose Hebrew-studying shop assistant overheard an Israeli customer smearing Poles, reacted by quietly telling him as she rang...
up his purchases that she would be pleased to give him a 10% discount if he stopped saying such horrible things about Poles.

Two uncomfortable experiences of my own as a college student in the early 1990s shocked me into recognition of the limits of my own inherited view. First was my response to a Polish acquaintance, when he casually remarked that his father had been interned in Auschwitz, that I hadn’t realised his family was Jewish. He replied – charitably revealing only a bit of the frustration he likely felt – that his family is not Jewish, and didn’t I realise that ethnic Poles, too, were put in camps.

The second experience occurred when I began chatting with a young man selling small souvenir paintings of Cracow’s historic sites. After a few minutes of pleasant banter, I asked him where he was from. He replied, ‘Oswiecim’, which I had recently learned was the Polish name for Auschwitz. That Oswiecim is an ordinary Polish town, and one that had been more than half Jewish before World War II, was still relatively new to me. In any case these realities did not make a dent in the much more significant fact that to my (American-Jewish) mind, this man had grown up in Auschwitz. I could not hide my consternation and said something along the lines of, ‘Oh my gosh that must be a horrible place to live’. To condense an exchange whose details have blurred over the years, what I remember clearly is that I was informed that the town is not the camp, that his parents had been re-settled there after the war not by their own choosing, that he enjoyed a normal youth thank-you-very-much, and – most enduringly discomfiting for me – was I trying to shame him?

It is clear that cultural critique is not solely the domain of visiting Jews, nor is the direction of such critique aimed only at Poles. While Zdzislaw of the Jarden Bookshop sees his mandate as criticising Polish distortions and ignorance regarding Jewishness, he and Lucyna also work to dispel misconceptions about Poland that Jews bring with them. As Lucyna told me:

I fight sometimes with Jews [too], because [they need to] understand [that just] as on the Polish side, [on] the Jewish side there’s a kind of mythology, you know, from the years of the Second World War time, and it’s not exactly the truth, what they’re telling about Poles. Of course it’s possible, you know, to break this. But it’s a very long process; it’s for generations. But somebody has to start something, anyway. In this way you can get what you want.

Zdzislaw often lamented the lack of basic historical knowledge of many visiting Jews, telling me stories like one about a Jewish group that called the bookshop wanting a guide for Auschwitz – a Jewish guide, they specified. Zdzislaw told them that there is only one ‘half-Jewish’ guide at Auschwitz, but that he could promise them a competent guide for Auschwitz and Birkenau. ‘No, no’ they responded, ‘we only want to see Auschwitz.’ Zdzislaw was furious, telling me, ‘They demand a Jewish guide, but they don’t even know that Birkenau is so much more important, where the vast majority of Jews died!’ He said he had informed and chastised them, and that they had been surprised by the information.

Kazimierz’s particular quality as a meeting ground also stimulates intersubjective reckonings of heritage among visiting Jews, at times within family groups or between generations. As I was walking out of Szeroka Street with two American-Jewish friends, an elderly man shouted excitedly across the square, ‘Oh! Jews!’ He hurried over, his two middle-aged daughters following. He was a Jewish Holocaust survivor, originally from Lvov and now American. As is the norm among Jewish tourists in
Kazimierz, he told us his wartime story right then and there in the middle of the road. I told them about the research that brought me to Poland. The response came from one of his daughters: ‘How can you bear to live here?’ As I tried to formulate an answer, a local friend walked by and we exchanged a few words. The survivor’s face lit up. ‘You speak Polish!’ he declared. ‘My kids never learned Polish’, he added, shaking his lowered head with apparent regret. The same daughter, looking away, said to the air, ‘He never taught us Polish’. A moment later she turned back to me and snapped, ‘Why do you speak Polish?’

Such encounters suggest the pain and ambivalence on both dangling ends of a broken cultural link between Jewishness and Polishness. Both child and parent struggle with a deeply felt locus of identity, at once intimate and volatile: Polish language. Something that could have bound them together in intimacy (as well as to other Poles), binds them instead to opposite sides of a cultural-historical chasm.16

Identification: expanding the collective self
Reconciliation consists, in part, in pursuing ‘more inclusive principles of present day affiliation’, or the expansion of group identity (Borneman 2002, p. 286). The popularity of a narrow, ethno-national understanding of Polishness (i.e. Pole = Catholic) has been a central problem for Polish–Jewish relations and notions of shared heritage. It can be argued that the naturalisation of this conception of Polishness constricted the ‘universe of obligation’ (Fein 1979) Christian Poles inhabited and in terms of which they acted towards their Jewish fellow citizens during the Nazi occupation.

But identity categories are malleable and Kazimierz is a place where broader conceptions of Polishness are promulgated. Rather than only providing a space for Jews as a significant ‘other’ in Poland (which they also do), Kazimierz heritage brokers actively call into question rigidly defined notions of Polishness and Jewishness altogether. As I have argued elsewhere, this makes the site conducive for Poles to explore a range of identifications with Jewishness, many of which are motivated by a progressive cultural politics (Lehrer 2007). It is a place where otherwise contradictory identities can be reconciled.

Kazimierz also accommodates visiting Jews who want to transcend the us/them binary promulgated by the hegemonic Jewish establishment by (re)claiming an embodied, emplaced identification with Polish-Jewish heritage. ‘My grandmother is from Poland’, Adam, a 20-year-old Jewish Australian told me, sitting on a low stone wall along a Kazimierz alley, adding quickly that his grandmother hates it when he expresses feelings of connection to Poland, and had protested at his visit. ‘She doesn’t want me to think this way, but besides the atrocities, I know this is [she] grew up. I see people on the street, going into fruit shops just like my grandmother did. I see their faces and think it’s amazing, all these people who look just like my grandmother would’ve looked here’. Such a cultural politics of geographic affiliation functions in interestingly asymmetrical ways. While an embrace of Israel may be a progressive gesture among Poles, for foreign Jews a turn towards Poland as a site of ancestral rootedness suggests resistance to hegemonic identity categories and postures. Marisa Davidson, a doctoral student in Jewish history, told me that she went to Poland ‘hoping to connect’. ‘Israel wasn’t doing it for me’, she says. ‘I wanted to find another way of thinking of myself as a historical Jew.’
Conclusion

Sociologist Slawomir Kapralski has characterised the landscape of memory work in post-communist Poland as a ‘complicated, multi-centred space in which critical attempts to reclaim memory from national myths and … silences, co-exist with the mythologisation of the past and … conspiracy to expunge inconvenient memory’ (Kapralski 2007, p. 98). The heritage brokers I met in Kazimierz are workers for the former cause, most particularly by calling into question one ‘crucial feature’ of Polish national identity, namely ‘the belief that (ethnic) Poles have been the main victims of history in general and of WWII in particular’ (Kapralski 2007, p. 98).

It may be that ‘the desire to work through one’s own traumatic memory does not necessarily emerge from the self’ (Rosen 2008, p. 230). Encounters with the reality of ‘the other’ can seed recognition, empathy and new senses of ‘we’. In this way heritage spaces are not just lieux, but milieux de memoire, where our abstracted, homogenising national stories are called into question through the daily telling and living of our unique and overlapping individual stories. Thus, the possibility of pluralistic publics may depend on nurturing public spaces that draw estranged groups together to do the hard work of practising conciliatory heritage. If one listens closely Kazimierz reveals two rare qualities. First, it is a space where people come because they can enact deeply felt truths about who they are and what they care about that may not find expression elsewhere. Second, it is a place where Poles and Jews can be heard listening to each other’s truths.

One summer evening, a Jewish family – grandfather, son-in-law, grandson – stood in the Jarden Bookshop, leafing through books. The father, after ascertaining my Jewish-ness, pointed to the grandfather and said, ‘He’s from here. He didn’t want to come back, but my wife wanted to see his town.’ Zdzislaw asked if the grandfather could speak Polish. ‘Sure he can. Pop, speak Polish to the man’, said the son-in-law. The grandfather leaned over the counter and began to tell his story to Zdzislaw in a mix of Polish, Yiddish, and English. Zdzislaw listened intently. The grandfather described being tied up – ‘like this’, he said, pressing his wrists together as if bound – and turned over to the Nazis. ‘By Poles’, he said, leaning closer to Zdzislaw to make his point, ‘Di Polyakn’, he repeated in Yiddish. Zdzislaw said nothing, only nodding, as if to encourage the grandfather to say more.

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Note on Contributor

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**Notes**

1. Zdzislaw told me this in a conversation in 1994. He has since expanded, and other Jewish bookshops have opened, two in Kazimierz, and at least one in Warsaw.

2. The anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 came as a wake-up call not only to ‘Poles of Jewish origin’, but also to young members of the opposition, who attacked anti-Semitism as a discredited tool of the state (Steinlauf 1997, p. 109). Censorship also stimulated interest in Jewish history, and ‘[r]e-inviting the Jew into Poland’s collective memory stood … in opposition to the official efforts to make him disappear forever’ (Irwin-Zarecka 1989, p. 127).

3. I use ‘heritage brokers’ following Kurin’s ‘culture brokers’, which he uses to describe individuals who bring audiences together and represent, translate, negotiate, or exchange representations or definitions of culture or cultural goods among them.


5. I take heritage to be the meanings and representations ascribed in the present day to artefacts, landscapes, beliefs, memories and traditions understood as bearing traces of the (cultural or national) past.


7. Steffen (2008) surveys how Jewish themes polarise Polish society. Gruber (2002) calls contemporary engagements with Jewish heritage ‘virtual’, while Waligorska (2008) argues that their most popular form – klezmer music – should be seen largely in instrumental terms, as a ‘rhetorical device’ and ‘political correctness for all occasions’. Significant state-level initiatives have been undertaken on the Polish side. These include major interpretive changes at Nazi camp memorials, a formal apology in 2001 by the then-president Kwaśniewski for the pogrom at Jedwabne, and former Warsaw Mayor and late Polish president Lech Kaczyński’s donation of land and over 30% of the cost to create a world-class Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, scheduled to open in 2012.

8. Scholarship by Kugelmass (1995, esp. the ideas of ‘stage’ and ‘pageant’) Feldman (2008), Sheramy (2007), and Stier (2003) characterises such travel broadly in these terms. Jewish individuals or family groups also seek personal heritage in specific towns, and other, comparatively marginal exceptions include Hasidic pilgrims to the tombs of dynastic Galician rabbis, genealogy enthusiasts who comb Polish archives, and fans of Yiddishkayt and klezmer who follow the festival circuit. But these groups are primarily interested in and hold in esteem pre-war Jewish heritage, understood as a discreet entity situated on a Polish backdrop, rather than a hybrid entity linked to Poles. An enduring example of the nostalgic view of East European Jewish culture as embodied in an idealised, hermetic shtetl is Zborowski and Herzog’s (1995) *Life is with People*, especially as discussed in its 1995 introduction by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. The fundamentally negative attitude towards Poland as a meaningful locus for Jewish memory is illustrated by the reserve among American Jews regarding the planned Warsaw museum, evidenced by difficulties in raising funds (see Ostow 2008, pp. 170–171). But change is afoot; it is worth noting Israeli ambassador to Poland David Peleg’s categorical statement in a speech I heard him give at the Galicja Jewish Museum in Kazimierz during the Jewish Cultural Festival in June 2008 that ‘Poland is not an anti-Semitic country’.

9. While the Israeli-Jewish and diasporic Jewish perspectives on Poland should not be conflated they have common roots and are structurally intertwined in a shared pedagogy of youth pilgrimage and thus can be meaningfully discussed together in this context. Their differences are also not particularly evident from the Polish point of view.

10. The full key of the Polish map lists, in this order, ‘Synagogues and houses of prayer open, Synagogues, Cemeteries, Ghettoes during World War II, Nazi death camps, Nazi concentration camps, Other important sites (Jewish history), Centres of Hasidism’. For legibility,
I have provided only a fragment of the Polish map, onto which I collaged the key. While the Israeli map is in English, the rest of the brochure to which it was attached is in Hebrew.

11. Per local scholar Edyta Gawron, ‘With respect to the material sphere, the Jewish Community [of Cracow] gained much. It was, however, unsuccessful in coordination of the activities aimed at rejuvenation and restoration of Jewish religious and cultural life. Thus, the present revival of Jewish culture has taken place in Cracow thanks to non-Jews with the help of the Jews from Israel and the Diaspora’ (Gawron 2005, p. 209, cited in Murzyn 2006, p. 394). The Ronald Lauder Foundation Youth Club, long situated in the Izaak synagogue, was another significant site, but it publicised its Jewishness in orthodox religious terms – implicitly discouraging non-Jewish participation – and alienated many young Jews due to personality conflicts among its leadership. In spring 2008 a modern Jewish Community Centre (donated by Charles, Prince of Wales) opened in the centre of Kazimierz. While explicitly a space for Jews (rather than a ‘Jewish space’ in Pinto’s sense), given its savvy, young, Polish-speaking American-Israeli director, it may nonetheless also contribute to the latter.

12. The restaurant, now called Klezmer Hois, has grown to include a hotel and klezmer cabaret, and an affiliated bookshop and publishing house, Austeria, a cutting-edge, bilingual (Polish/English) imprint for Jewish-themed works.

13. Until mid-1943, all the prisoners at the Plaszów forced labour camp were Jews. In July 1943, a separate section was created for Polish prisoners. Except for ‘political prisoners’, Poles served their sentences and were released. Jews remained in the camp indefinitely, or were sent on to nearby Auschwitz. For inmate population estimates see Offen and Jacobs (2008).

14. Borneman (2002, pp. 286, 302) stresses that preconditions for reconciliation must include ‘an appreciation of the intersubjectivity of the present’ with the uncomfortable encounters with difference this entails.

15. I thank Stephanie Rowden for this turn of phrase.

16. Such unanticipated encounters with cultural similarity or sharedness can be as provocative as confronting difference. Visiting Jews are often shocked by how familiar they find Polish food, habits, gestures or phenotypes.

17. Not infrequently when I have ended talks using this vignette, the first ‘question’ from the audience will be from an elderly Jew (or occasionally a Pole) who begins, ‘I was born in Poland…’ and proceeds to tell their own story, which inevitably exceeds (and usually challenges) my own analytical framework. As Zdzisław seems to, I also welcome such intrusions of the ongoing lived experience of these issues into the meagre spaces I have attempted to create for them. I thank Birgit Meyer for bringing this dynamic to my attention.

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