

Members' Forum

A Past That Does Not Go Away

The Ludwik Krzyżanowski *Polish Review* Award recognizes the best article in *The Polish Review* in the year previous to the award. The most recent awardee is **Dariusz Stola** for his “There is a Polish-Jewish History beyond the Holocaust,” *The Polish Review*, 66, 4 (December 2021): 13-21. In this article, he reviews some of the discussions that took place regarding the Holocaust as early as the wartime years through more modern debates.

For a few decades, we could observe strong public interest in Holocaust history in Poland. It was in a feedback loop with the expansion of relevant research and a variety of cultural productions: films and performances, books and poems, paintings and exhibitions, but its key articulation was a series of major public debates, which engaged the Polish public since the 1980s. Every few years, major media, historians, columnists, political leaders, clergy, philosophers, and many others felt obliged to speak up and write, often at length and emotionally, about the dramatic past events. The debate following the publication of Jan T. Gross’s book *Neighbors*, on a mass crime in the small town of Jedwabne in 1941, was the largest and most intensive public debate on history in Poland ever, overshadowing even the controversies on the more recent and politically consequential communist past.

The Polish debates were a case in a broader phenomenon of such controversies in Europe, not only the widely commented debates in Germany and France but many discussions that took place almost everywhere, which reflected the growing importance of the Holocaust in the narratives of European history. Some of the particular features of the Polish debates resulted from the special character of the Holocaust in German-occupied Poland, which was the main site and scene of the genocide as indicated in my article. Some others were a consequence of the four decades of communist rule with its heavy-handed memory policies and its gradual erosion in the 1980s.

Polish debates began early, almost simultaneously with the Nazi “Final Solution.” These were at first the discussions among Polish non-Jewish observers about what exactly was the Nazi policy towards the Jews, as it was unfolding in its lethal and total nature. Not less controversial were the opinions on how the non-Jewish Poles—individuals and underground organizations, and the Polish government-in-exile,—should react. In under-



ground reports and bulletins of various political orientations, as well as in utterances recorded in diaries and memoirs, we find a variety of opinions on what the non-Jewish Poles could and should do or avoid doing. As thousands of Jews escaped the ghettos and camps, more than in any other German-occupied country, and were targets of manhunts, including by the Poles, these questions were of an urgent moral and practical nature.

The controversies did not end in 1945. In the early postwar years, a number of leading intellectuals engaged in soul-searching about the behaviors towards the Jews during and after the war. It was probably the first of such debates in Europe. Unfortunately, it ended soon, with the accelerated Sovietization of Poland in 1948. Communist countries were not a good place for any open debate, any debate about the recent past in particular. While World War II was among the leading topics of the government-controlled media and school textbooks, the crimes against the Jews were blended into broader categories of Nazi crimes, or marginalized. Initially, Polish communists followed the Soviet pattern of anti-fascist internationalism, which presented the Jews as one of many groups of victims of the Nazi terror. Later on, along with the growing role of nationalism in the legitimization of the communist party rule, Jewish victims were presented as “Polish citizens” or simply Poles, blurring the unique character of the Nazi anti-Jewish policy. Collaboration in the Nazi persecution of the Jews, and antisemitism in general, became a taboo topic.

However, after the destalinization of 1956 Holocaust research developed in some pockets of Polish academia, while writers and artists produced a surprisingly large number of books and poems, films and paintings that dealt with the horrible past. Poland was also unique in the Soviet bloc in having not a small number of monuments and memorials that explicitly spoke of the Jewish tragedy. As millions of Poles had been witnesses to the tragedy during the war, scenes from this past were present in private narratives, told and retold to relatives and friends, albeit many troubling memories were clearly suppressed or did not find adequate forms of expression.

Poland was the first communist country where the new wave of Holocaust debates began in the 1980s. The first of the series of debates, which has continued up to the present, was in reaction to Claud Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* in 1985. The communist government protested the film as anti-Polish, but allowed its fragments to be broadcasted on national TV and shown in a few cinemas in full. This brought back the question of Polish attitudes towards the Jews to the public stage, producing numerous commentaries in both the official and underground press. Much bigger was the debate two years later, in response to the

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article by Jan Błoński in the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Błoński asked painful questions about Polish reactions to the Holocaust and called his compatriots to moral compensation for “indifference, which condemned Jews to much lonelier and more solitary deaths than they would otherwise have suffered”. In 1989, in the midst of the unfolding peaceful revolution, erupted another controversy - about the Carmel in Auschwitz, the Catholic monastery established next to the ground of the former Nazi camp.

Thus, when the rest of Eastern Europe was regaining the freedom of speech, Poland had been already engaged in Holocaust-related controversies. Polish elites recognized the Holocaust as a major topic in Polish history that requires addressing. And so it has remained. Even the most appalling policies of the present populist government, like its attempts to curtail the freedom of speech and Holocaust research, paradoxically testify, to this recognition.

Estranging the Novel: Poland, Ireland, and Theories of World Literature

The Waclaw Lednicki Humanities Award is presented for the most outstanding book or creative work published in the Humanities. The recipient most recent recipient is **Katarzyna Bartoszynska**, Ithaca College, for *Estranging the Novel: Poland, Ireland, and Theories of World Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021). In the following essay, she briefly explains her journey of discovery.

My book is, in so many ways, a happy accident. The advisor in college who steered me into comparative literature rather than English as a major; the class on Irish literature that I somewhat arbitrarily decided to take during my first year of graduate studies; happening across Catherine Gallagher's essay on fictionality at exactly the moment when I was feeling stuck and looking for a way to frame my overall argument; happening across a book called *On Literary Worlds* at exactly the moment when I had all but given up finding a way to frame the overall argument into a coherent central thesis. I was lucky, too, in finding Catherine Goldstead, an editor at Johns Hop-



kins University Press who saw the value in a seemingly unmarketable book. I find myself returning to these various twists of fate and retracing the path that led to *Estranging the Novel* because even now, the book seems like such an unlikely creature.

Lately I have been thinking that it is also very much a product of a particular moment in the humanities — the early 2000s, a moment of heightened interest in processes of globalization that increasingly made the world itself seem like a reasonable object of study, producing dazzling new considerations of questions of scale, and method. There was a surge of excitement in the intellectual possibilities of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary work, and a faith that there would be funding to imagine new institutional structures to accommodate it. Much has been written about the pitfalls of such initiatives, and what happened to them when funding dried up and we found ourselves forced to argue for the value of the very disciplines we were ostensibly trying to transcend. In a peculiar sort of way, my book benefitted from both the intellectual stimulus that came from a moment when the humanities seemed to be booming, and from a kind of semi-benign neglect that followed when they seemed to be in crisis. I was allowed, at every step, to study and write whatever I wanted, without having to think pragmatically about where it fit. Because a significant chunk of my academic career was spent at an institution that did not have significant research expectations, I was free to do whatever I wanted (when I could fit it in around significant teaching and service obligations), and had all the time I needed to figure out the way to frame my thoughts. Hence the odd result; a book that relentlessly questions its own central premise, the resemblance between the complicated fate of the novel form in Polish and Irish literature, and how it is understood.

It is ironic that I find myself constantly contextualizing and recontextualizing *Estranging the Novel*, given that its central argument is grounded in a polemical rejection of contextualist readings — a frustration with the way that both Polish and Irish literature are read primarily in relation to their geopolitical and socioeconomic circumstances. But in truth, such readings are the soil from which the book grows: you cannot be interdisciplinary without disciplines. The book is not a “No, but,” it’s a “Yes, and.”

I was very nervous, of course, about how the book would be received — it is, in some sense, an outsider everywhere it goes, urging close attention to a series of books that almost no one will have read all of. I am so grateful for the warmth and generosity of the responses I have received thus far, and I hope that it will serve to make literary studies more hospitable to all kinds of interdisciplinary dialogues, and to all kinds of texts and the various ways of studying them.