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‘A Picnic Underpinned with Unease’: Spring in Warsaw and New Genre Polish-Jewish Memory Work

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Poland, whose pre-war Jewish population of 3.5 million was decimated during World War II and further reduced by anti-Semitic incidents in the post-war Polish republic, has only a small Jewish presence today, but over the last two decades has come to recognize and work through the painful Jewish past with an increasing intensity. After Communism fell and this past was released from state censorship, there was a flood of publicly suppressed information – accompanied by public expressions of collective memory – regarding the 1000-year history and violent destruction of Poland’s Jews. Spurred by new scholarly and journalistic writings, as well as the visits of foreign Jews (many with Polish roots), the 1990s and early 2000s saw public spaces reassigned some of their former Jewish meanings through official memorial forms like ceremonies, signage, renovation of historic sites and monuments (Kapralski, 2001; Meng, 2011; Murzyn-Kupisz and Purchla, 2009). A flagship project representing such official memorial efforts is the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which opened in Warsaw in 2014. Other, more grassroots forms of remembering were also growing up in response to and alongside these, in the realms of tourism and heritage brokering (Gruber, 2002; Lehrer, 2013; Waligór ska, 2013). But in parallel fashion – and picking up speed in the mid-2000s – another kind of memory work was beginning to claim public attention. Social and cultural ‘interventions’ undertaken by artists, academics, youth groups and other culture brokers, began to create provocative spaces of dialogue and self-reflection, in staged installations or happenings in which individuals were asked to participate in active, social, critical forms of remembering.

In this article we offer a preliminary analysis of the motives, forms, feelings and consequences of these newly visible memorial forms by focusing on one case study: the participatory performance Spring in Warsaw, a ‘counter-march’ led by the Israeli group Public Movement in Warsaw’s former wartime Jewish ghetto in April 2009, conceived in response to Israeli youth Holocaust pilgrimage season. The Public Movement performance is particularly interesting to consider as it took place in a highly symbolic
space of both Jewish suffering and resistance, and it was designed expressly in response to and in dialogue with officially sanctioned commemorative practices, both Jewish and Polish. The performance also raises the intriguing question of the special function of the ‘returning Jew’ as inhabiting a privileged role in attempts to catalyze critical Polish memory work on the country’s difficult past and possible pluralistic futures.

**Re-Mixing History**

The defining characteristic of this new genre of memorial interventions is their recombinative quality. Different from simple ‘re-enactments’, this new approach may be thought of as a ‘subjunctive’ politics of history – a ‘what if’ proposition that plays with reimagining and recombining a range of Jewish and Polish memories, present-day realities, and future aspirations.²

If the first wave of remembering emphasized a basic need for ‘re-collecting’ an elided narrative, diagnosing an unacknowledged illness infecting the national body and exposing (and perhaps thereby exacerbating) a painful wound, it also set in motion a vortex of revelation and denial that has come to characterize much Polish debate about the Jewish past. A second wave of memory work, in the form of a new genre of artistic intervention we identify here, has grown up in response to the problems unleashed by the first wave. It can be characterized by their attempts to transcend the terms of the historical debate and to acknowledge the various toxins released by it. Artists have thus emerged as key players, administering ‘therapy’ in various forms, in an attempt to treat a broad range of symptoms that have not responded to the prescription of straightforward historical revelation.³

These new genre projects can be more accurately characterized as ‘memory work’ due to their ‘collective groping, negotiation and contestation over the proper meaning to be assigned to this memory, the proper locus of responsibility and proper forms of commemoration’ (Törnquist-Plewa, 2011). They attempt to render abstract ideas about the past concrete and personal, and create spaces where individual experiences and emotions can be expressed and channelled into new sensory collectivities.⁴ We thus approach these performances not as representations, but rather as embodied experiences, staging and inviting participation in ‘repertoires’ of historical and cultural memory.⁵

What concerns do such projects raise, and what desires do they fulfil? To whom are they speaking? What do they ask participants or audience members to do, feel or imagine? What new cultural, social, political or emotional spaces might they open? What opposition do they trigger? In addressing these questions, we aim to illuminate, capture and assess a pivotal historical moment of alchemy and emergence around Polish national identity and Holocaust memory. We discern a new moment in Polish memory culture, in an era in which the forces shaping national memory in public have become simultaneously more transnational and more local, intersecting