

The Poles, the Jews and the Holocaust: reflections on an AME trip to Auschwitz

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Two trips to Auschwitz (in 1989 and 2003) provide a context for reflection on fundamental issues in civic and moral education. Custodians of the Auschwitz historical site are currently aware of its responsibility to humanity to educate about the genocide against the Jews, as a morally distinct element in its presentation of Nazi crimes at Auschwitz. Prior to the fall of Communism in 1989, the site's message was dominated by a misleading civic narrative about Polish victimization by, and resistance to, Naziism. In this article, I discuss the attempts of many Polish intellectuals during the past twenty-five years to engage in an honest and difficult civic project of facing up to their history, as it is entwined with anti-Semitism, with the centuries-long presence of Jews in Poland, and with their current absence. An interaction with a tour guide who took me to be criticizing Poles for their failure to help Jews during the Holocaust prompts further reflections on the difficulties of grasping the moral enormity of genocide, on the dangers of stereotyping, on the conditions under which it is appropriate to proffer and to withhold well-founded moral judgments, and on the moral importance of appropriate feelings and attitudes when moral action is extraordinarily risky or dangerous.

At the July 2003 conference of the Association for Moral Education (AME), a group of around sixty of us visited Auschwitz, located near Krakow, Poland—the city in which the conference was held. I had visited Auschwitz in 1989, as the communist government in Poland was crumbling, and I was eager to see how the historical museum and memorial there had changed in the post-communist era—how it currently attempted to address one of the greatest challenges to moral reflection and moral education in modern history. Before speaking about the trips specifically, it is essential to frame the general moral and civic tasks facing historical museums and memorials such as Auschwitz.¹

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The tasks of moral education: the particular and the universal

These tasks fall into two general categories—particular and universal. Regarding the former, many museums and memorials are purely local or national and civic in character, for example, those focusing on an American president or British monarch. They may engage with vital dimensions of local or national history and have an important civic role in that regard. Yet, although every museum is located somewhere in particular, not all have deep ties to civic tasks related to that location. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example, has only tenuous links with American history specifically, despite its national prominence in Washington DC, and the Museum takes on moral and civic tasks of a more universal character.

The Auschwitz Memorial and Museum (its official name, and which I will generally refer to as the ‘Auschwitz Museum’), by contrast, has both a national and a universal significance. ‘All over the world’ begins its website, ‘Auschwitz has become a symbol of terror, genocide, and the Holocaust’. This universality takes two distinct forms. One is simply that the victims of Naziism (in general, and those at Auschwitz in particular) spanned many different nationalities and ethnicities, therefore requiring a supranational perspective. A second form of Holocaust universality recognizes a distinctiveness within this plurality of the Jews (and perhaps Gypsies/Roma as well),² as marked out for extermination simply by virtue of their ethnicity, but gives this particularity a universal significance. The notion of the Holocaust as a ‘crime against humanity’, articulated at the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leadership after the Allied victory, was meant to express the idea that certain moral violations were so grave as to constitute an assault on humanity itself, on the ‘human status’ (Gaita, 1998). Raphael Lemkin’s invention of the term ‘genocide’ (in his 1944 book *Axis rule in occupied Europe*) was meant to express the distinct horror of the Holocaust which had not up until then been articulated in international law or morality (Power, 2002).

Although the Holocaust possesses universal significance of these two forms, it was carried out primarily on Polish soil, where almost all the Nazi death camps and most of the concentration camps were located. The Holocaust in general, and Auschwitz in particular, thus plays a role in Polish national history that has no exact parallel elsewhere. The Auschwitz Museum, therefore, confronts a national/civic task that must contend with the particularities of Polish history.

In 1989, the Auschwitz Memorial and Museum was entirely inadequate to its universalist challenge. Single barracks at the Auschwitz I historical site were dedicated to particular nationalities—French, Greek, Belorussian, Czech and so on. (Auschwitz I was indeed a daunting collection of different nationalities, but most of the variety involved national differentiations within the Jewish group.) Only one of these barracks was devoted to Jewish victims. There was little recognition of the distinctive fate of Jews and Gypsies/Roma as ethnic groups slated for extermination. Birkenau, the much larger death camp built in 1941, three kilometres from the Auschwitz I camp and used almost entirely for the extermination of Jews, was barely part of the Auschwitz tour, virtually devoid of historical markers.

There were, indeed, moving and powerful displays of suitcases, glasses, hair and other artefacts testifying to mass slaughter and Nazi atrocities against all inmates. But one would not have recognized that genocide of Jews had taken place unless one already knew it. By contrast, there was a very explicit engagement with Polish national identity. Indeed this was very much the primary focus of the Museum in 1989. Auschwitz I plays a vital role in Polish history as the site at which the Nazis deported and killed Polish intelligentsia and Polish political opponents in an attempt to destroy Polish national identity and its capacity for resistance.³ Much space at the Museum was devoted to the Polish underground resistance, which operated throughout occupied and incorporated Poland, and inside Auschwitz as well.

At the same time, the Museum's portrayal of the Jewish role in Polish history during the Holocaust and before was entirely inadequate. The failure to recognize genocide against the Jews also distorted the presentation of the Polish experience of the Nazi period. Three million of the five to six million Jews killed were Polish, yet the fact that massacre of Jews was a central project of the Nazi occupation of Poland was nowhere in evidence at the Auschwitz museum. In addition, the impression was given that rescue of Jews was almost a national project on the part of Poles in general, rather than an effort of a very small number of exceptionally morally heroic individuals and groups.

Despite these shortcomings of the Auschwitz Museum, my 1989 visit was still a deeply moving experience. Ironically, the lack of official attention to the Birkenau site rendered it in some ways a more powerful experience, certainly than the Auschwitz I site, and even in some ways than the later AME visit to Birkenau. The site was entirely bleak and unmarked, and a friend and I were among only five or six visitors there. We walked through the famous arched gate through which trains arrived in Birkenau, and along the platform where hundreds of thousands of Jews were discharged—disoriented, desperately thirsty and hungry, exhausted and degraded from their days of travel in horribly unsanitary conditions—to be immediately 'selected' by Secret Service (SS) officers (generally doctors) for immediate extermination in the gas chambers, or for a few weeks or months reprieve labouring in one of the camps in the Auschwitz complex. I felt I could sense the ghosts of these prisoners haunting the landscape as I walked slowly along the platform through the middle of the Birkenau camp to the destroyed but partially discernible gas chambers and crematoria. I was reminded of the film *Shoah*,⁴ with its long, slow panning over fields which covered former death camps at Treblinka, Sobibor and elsewhere, deliberately eschewing any attempt at a visual representation of the horrors of the Holocaust. Such 'education by indirection' is successful only for those who already know a good deal about the Holocaust and can bring their informed moral imagination to a site with few direct indicators of the Holocaust. Since the early 1990s, over half a million people visit Auschwitz every year, and its proprietors clearly recognize that they can not assume such knowledge and must start the moral and civic education from scratch for each visitor.

The challenges of moral education about the Holocaust

The AME trip in 2003 had been carefully planned. Three guides from the Auschwitz Historical Museum were available to us. All were extraordinarily well-informed. The guide of my group was a young woman whom I will call 'Jaska', perhaps in her early thirties, a college graduate who had been unable to find work in her field, and who had worked at Auschwitz for ten years. An Auschwitz guide is surely a moral educator, whether she would explicitly view herself under that label or not. It is impossible to think of helping people gain some comprehension of the Holocaust and of Auschwitz without recognizing this as a moral or morally-informed project. A person who knew how many people were killed in the Holocaust, and who had a detailed understanding of the complex bureaucratic mechanism by which the Nazis accomplished this, but who failed to recognize that these events and facts constituted a moral horror could not be said to have 'understood the Holocaust'. Indeed, Adolf Eichmann, Hitler's expert on Jewish affairs, and Rudolf Höss, the Commandant of Auschwitz, had precisely the former sort of knowledge of the Holocaust, and one reads their testimonies and memoirs with a sense that they entirely failed to grasp the moral reality of what they were doing.

Conveying this horror is a daunting task, which I have faced in teaching an undergraduate course on the Holocaust. One recurrent example of this challenge is that my students have a difficult time using personal accounts of Holocaust survivors to understand the incomparable extent of the slaughter, and to recognize that the few who survived did so almost entirely because of luck. In his memoir translated into English in its American edition as *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi makes clear that whatever characteristics (work skills, personality and character traits) survivors possessed, there were always a vastly greater number with the same characteristics who perished (Levi, 1993).⁵ But most of my students cannot shake the view that those who lived somehow had their fate in their hands, with the implication that this was true of those who died as well. One student (very bright and thoughtful) said, for instance, that inmates 'who presented useful skills to the SS' could thereby gain reprieve from murder, as if the exercise of a bit of initiative would generally or characteristically garner rewards from the SS.

Perhaps there is something distinctly American in the fantasy that Holocaust victims held their fate in their own hands, or perhaps students want to feel that they could somehow have escaped death in that situation. This issue aside, it is indeed difficult to comprehend the moral enormity of killing millions of innocent people. The numbers roll around in one's brain, but one cannot attach the appropriate moral meaning to them.

This brings me back to our AME trip. Certainly visiting the actual site of the most important concentration/death camp in the Nazi system would be among the best ways to gain, or head toward, the requisite moral understanding. Yet a visit to Auschwitz still poses versions of the same challenges I have mentioned. The guides must find a way of conveying something of the experience of life and death in the camp, and something of the scale of death in a way that their audience, the motley group of visitors gathered together for their tour of the camp, can grasp.

Our Auschwitz guide and me

At first Jaska did not give the impression of having these moral challenges in mind. She spoke in a very clipped, almost mechanical manner. As she shepherded us from bunker to bunker, she would describe in stunning detail the unspeakable horrors to which prisoners were subjected, but in a seemingly flat, emotionless way. She explained the selections and showed us collections of items taken from the arriving trainloads—watches, suitcases, shoes, hair shorn from the women, and baby clothes.

These displays were sometimes incredibly moving. Different exhibits, or moments in the tour, moved different ones of us, who knows for what reason. One particularly powerful display case that I remembered from my earlier visit contained thousands of suitcases on which the Nazis had directed arriving prisoners to write their birthdates and day of arrival, as if to help the prisoner keep track of his or her belongings—one of many tricks to keep the arrivals from knowing what fate awaited them. Jaska focused on one: ‘You see this is Hannah’s suitcase. She is born in 1936. She arrives in 1942. She is a six year old girl who is being murdered’.

Although Jaska did occasionally try to individualize and humanize the victims, her distanced manner interfered with my ability to receive the message. I imagined that Jaska had given this tour so many times that whenever she reached a certain spot, it was as if she would turn on an inner recording and play it for her visitors. In moving from site to site, I do not remember her ever asking our group whether we had any questions. I decided to try to rouse some kind of more personal reaction from her. I started to use the time moving between sites (passing many other groups of visitors, speaking a wide variety of languages) to put some questions to her. For example, Jaska had shown us a recreation of the sleeping quarters of the prisoners, three bunks high, each bunk holding three or four prisoners who had so little room that they had to sleep on their sides all night, unable to move. They were rained on from leaky roofs, and the bottom of their quarters was covered with mud. For me, perhaps the most appalling aspect was that prisoners were allowed to go to the latrines only twice a day, for too short a period of time for all of them to do their business, and never overnight. Therefore, many of them ‘discharged themselves’ (I believe this was Jaska’s expression) in these sleeping areas as they lay there, fouling themselves and those next to them, and often those below them as well.⁶

As we walked to the next bunker, I asked Jaska whether she thought that the Nazis had subjected the inmates to such conditions not only because they did not care if they died today or tomorrow, but intentionally, in order to degrade and humiliate them, to reduce them to a level of almost subhuman depravity. (‘Depravation’ was the English translation given for this word on one of the displays.) ‘Yes, I think so’ Jaska said, not elaborating, nor inviting further discussion. I waited a few moments, then ventured, ‘Why do you think the Nazis did that?’ Jaska smiled grimly, slightly startled by the question: ‘Who can understand why people do such horrible things to one another?’ Yet her brief answer helped to begin to make her more of a real person to me.

I asked Jaska several other questions during our tour. She was deeply knowledge-

able about everything I asked—why only ten per cent of the SS who worked at the camps were apprehended, why so few prisoners tried to kill themselves on the electrified fences, whether prisoners went mad from standing in a one-square-yard space all night with three other prisoners (for committing minor infractions). Jaska speculated intelligently about questions for which no definite answer could be given. I came to experience her factual, organized mode of presentation as her way of trying to convey the virtually unbelievable conditions of the camp. I came to experience a sense of controlled fury in her presentation, rather than a lack of emotion. The unrelenting presentation of atrocity after atrocity, began, I felt, to convey Auschwitz as a world apart, a hell on earth, subject to a totally different mode of existence than anything we normally recognize as human.

One of the guides for another of the AME groups had a much warmer, more personal style, in which he solicited more individual concerns from his group and attempted to address them. Jaska could not, I imagine, have chosen to adopt such a style even if she had thought it preferable. It was just not in her personality to do so.⁷ Perhaps this other guide unintentionally conveyed a sense of reassurance that detracted from a confrontation with the horror. And perhaps there is some interplay between the challenges of moral education and the particular personality of a given moral educator that deserves more attention.

As a representative of the official position of the Auschwitz Museum, Jaska presented the genocide against the Jews as the central atrocity of Auschwitz. The Museum presented this genocide as a universal concern. It was not submerged in a misleading narrative about Polish victimization or resistance. In this sense, both the particularity of the Jewish experience under the Nazis, as well as its universal significance, were well expressed by the current form of the Auschwitz Museum, in contrast to 1989 and before. One could argue, however, that Jewish particularity should have been recognized in a further dimension as well—according recognition to the culture and history of European Jewry, as a way of indicating the value of what was lost in the Holocaust. This is over and above recognizing Jews as a distinct target, slated for extermination on the basis of ethnic or religious membership alone. It is not only individual lives that are lost in genocides, but cultural traditions and communal ways of life (Gaita, 1998; Blum, 1994a). The Auschwitz Museum as currently set up does help one to appreciate, if only fleetingly, the humanity of the million or more Jewish lives lost in the camp, a humanity shared with the other victims. But the value, and loss, of the history, the culture, the rich forms of Jewish communal life, are not on the Museum's agenda.⁸ In one sense, then, the full distinctive evil meant to be evoked by the concept of 'genocide' is only partly portrayed in the current exhibition.

Let me clarify this last point. To insist that the Nazi intention for the Jews was importantly, and morally, distinct from that of any other group—and is the reason why it counts as 'genocide'—in no way implies a greater value to be placed on individual Jewish lives than on Polish, Russian or Belgian lives. Each human life is equally valuable and precious. But a 'people' (an *ethnos* or *genos*) is more than a collection of the same number of individuals, and the extermination of a people

destroys more than individuals. At the same time, I wish entirely to dissociate myself from other moral stances that have, wrongly, been connected with this recognition of the distinctiveness of the Jewish fate during the Holocaust. From the point of view of appropriate moral concern and outrage, there is more in common between the Nazi treatment of the Jews and that of other groups, and between the former and other genocides (in Rwanda, Bosnia) and mass atrocities (Cambodia), than there is that morally distinguishes them (Blum, 2003).⁹

A painful conversation

Toward the end of our tour, I had an exchange with Jaska which was very distressing to me, and which, in retrospect, raised important issues on both the national/civic and the universal dimensions of Holocaust moral education. The incident took place not at Auschwitz I but at the end of our tour, at Birkenau. We were standing next to a crematorium that had been blown up by the Nazis as the Russian armies approached, and had been preserved by the Polish stewards of the Auschwitz site in that state.¹⁰

Jaska also told us about people from the camps who worked (as Primo Levi did) in factories where some members of the nearby towns also worked. She had also spoken of the (rare) attempts at escape in which prisoners might get away temporarily but were almost always caught. I asked her, 'Did the people in the surrounding areas know what was going on here at the camp?' In answering, she showed a degree of emotion, and of defensiveness, I had not seen before. I am not confident that I fully understood her answer to my question, but it was something like this: the Nazis did not want the area's residents to know what was going on. When they built Birkenau, they cleared people out of the nearby towns, brought Germans in to live, especially in the nice houses. (They had already brought Germans into this area of Poland and cleared locals out.) But yes, those Poles who remained did know, and they lived in fear that the same thing would happen to them. In fact, Jaska said, she herself is from this area and two of her grandmother's brothers were killed by the Nazis, one gunned down in the street, the other in Auschwitz itself.

I felt immediately that Jaska had perceived me as criticizing the Poles who lived in the area. I was mortified. I had unintentionally insulted this admirable moral educator (as I had by this time come to view her), and the tour was now over. Jaska walked back to the bus with another Polish woman while I agonized over this unfortunate end to our trip. I decided I needed to speak with her, so I waited next to her as, one by one, each member of our group thanked her for a job so well done. I said, choking back tears, that my question was not in the spirit of blaming Poles for not doing more to help Jews. I was simply trying to understand how the camp system worked in its geographical context. I wanted her to know that I would never presume to cast blame in a situation so extraordinary, one which my own experience has provided absolutely no point of comparison, or position from which to lodge such a criticism. Would she please accept my apology?

Jaska did so. She said that Americans and people from other countries do not

understand what life was like for non-Jewish Poles during the war under Nazi occupation. They blame the Poles; they say the Poles should have done more to help the Jews. But how could they? They lived in terror themselves everyday. Someone (a Jew, that is) would come and knock on your door and need help. But if you helped you risked your own life. The punishment for helping a Jew was death, and death to your family as well. What could you do in such a situation?

Then she related to me an incident from her early years as an Auschwitz guide. In one of her tour groups was a Holocaust survivor, who said to Jaska, 'You and your people are as bad as Hitler'. (I think it was 'are' rather than 'were', implicating current Poles, and implying a timeless and unchanging Polish anti-Semitism.) I cringed on Jaska's behalf, and felt a twinge of shame that the remark was made by a Jew like myself, though I also imagined what a trip to Auschwitz must evoke in a Holocaust survivor. I kept the latter reaction to myself, but apologized to Jaska for the insensitive behaviour of a fellow visitor. The exchange brought me some closure with Jaska, and I was greatly reassured to have had the opportunity to relieve my guilt for offending her.

'The Poles were worse than Hitler': retrospective thoughts

Later, reflecting on the incident, I wanted to pin down exactly what so troubled me about the Holocaust survivor's remark to Jaska, a sentiment I had not infrequently heard in some form growing up, from Holocaust survivors and other Jews. In my initial reflections there seemed at least three things. First, in a context like that of Auschwitz, it appears to lay blame for Auschwitz, and for the Holocaust, on Poles as much as, or even more than, Germans. This is preposterous and appalling. The guilt and responsibility for Auschwitz lies squarely with the Nazis. Their farming out of some of the most gruesome tasks of murders to non-Germans hardly reduces that responsibility. Indeed, it makes it worse, both in the attempt to mask their own responsibility and in coercing others to carry out atrocities.

Even putting the comparison to Hitler aside, and seeing the remark only as imputing anti-Semitism to Poles in general, it is objectionable. Some Poles risked their lives and the lives of their families to shelter, or attempt to shelter, Jews. Many Poles were not anti-Semitic, and regretted what happened to Jews, even if they were, or felt, unable to help (as Jaska had said). More generally, such a remark seems nothing but a stereotypic generalization. All ethnic, national, racial and religious groups are internally diverse in ways masked by such generalizations.

A third grounds for objecting to the remark concerned whom it was directed toward and in what setting. David Jones helpfully distinguishes between the cognitive act of making a moral judgement and the overt act of publicly expressing that judgement (Jones 1999, pp. 21ff). Our philosophical and psychological theories of morality have tended to conflate this distinction, masking the important domain of moral assessment attached to overt judging that does not apply to the more familiar issue of whether we are justified in a given cognitive moral judgement. I saw Jaska as a courageous Pole who, by working as a guide in Auschwitz, had taken her stand

against anti-Semitism. Thus Jaska was a particularly inappropriate person against whom to lodge a charge of general Polish anti-Semitism. (Yet, thinking about the context in another way, perhaps *for the survivor*, the experienced context of her critical outburst was not, as for me, 'Auschwitz the historical museum' but 'Auschwitz the camp'.)

The Poles, the Jews, the Holocaust and communism: a brief history

When I returned home from the conference, I looked more deeply into Polish/Jewish history, and came to feel that the issues raised in the exchange with Jaska were more complex than the above analysis implies. At least a few of the highlights of this history seem to me essential to understanding both the national/civic and the universal moral education challenges of Auschwitz.

Poland has always been a strongly Christian, and Catholic, nation, but for several centuries after King Casimir the Great invited Jews to reside there in the fourteenth century, Poland was a relatively safe place for Jews, compared with Western Europe. Through the outbreak of the Second World War, Polish Jewry comprised the most numerous element in world Jewry, and was its spiritual core. In contrast to Western Europe, by and large, Polish Jews did not assimilate, and remained in many ways a separate society. Eva Hoffman comments on a moral implication of this situation:

The distance between Poles and Jews was desired by both parties, although for different reasons. Both nations had their syndromes of superiority, although with unequal powers of acting upon them. The impact of Polish prejudices was perforce far more injurious to the Jews than vice versa. The Poles were hardly ready to admit Jews into full Polishness, or full humanity. But Jewish separatism was also an active choice, and it also had its consequences. (Hoffman, 1997, p.73)

For many centuries, Poland had been prey to its more powerful neighbours, and in the late eighteenth century, it was partitioned by Prussia, Russia and Austria, and ceased to exist as a state entity until 1914. As a result of this history, Polish national identity has always contained a strong element both of a sense of victimization and also pride in not acceding to the oppressor. In the late nineteenth century, anti-Semitism became an important element in Polish nationalism, and anti-Semitic parties were very active in the interwar period.

It is a mistake, however, to lay at the feet of Polish anti-Semitism the Nazis' choice of Poland as the site of their death camps. Poland was simply where most Jews were, and was sheltered from Western scrutiny and the German public, which, while unquestionably imbued with anti-Semitic sentiments by the late 1930s, had shown in its failure to support the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938, a distaste for too visible a persecution of Jews. The Nazi occupation of Poland was the most brutal of all occupations. Three million non-Jewish Poles were killed by the Nazis. Approximately one million Poles were sent to Germany to work in slave labour. Whether Polish anti-Semitism and the sense of alienness and moral distance be-

tween Jews and Poles played any role in facilitating the Nazi's 'final solution of the Jewish question' are matters on which scholars are not in agreement.

Approximately 3 million of the 3.3 million Polish Jews were killed in the Holocaust. The non-Jewish Polish population was 31 million in 1939. Approximately 80,000 to 120,000 Jews survived the war on the 'Aryan' side in Poland, many without any help from Poles, but one respected estimate is that between 160,000 and 360,000 Poles assisted Jews (Prekerowa, 1990, p.73). Poles put up a courageous resistance to the occupation; but the Polish underground, especially the AK ('Armia Krajowa' or 'Home Army'), the major armed Polish underground group, was, by and large, hostile to or insufficiently supportive of both Jewish fugitives and the Jewish resistance, for example, with regard to the Warsaw uprising of April–May 1943. (The extent of Polish resistance in the face of penalties similar to those for sheltering Jews puts in high relief the relative absence of helping Jews.) On the other hand, in 1943, the AK formed a unit, known by the acronym 'Zegota', dedicated purely to Jewish rescue activities, and it was the Polish underground that brought news of the Holocaust to the world at large (which, tragically, failed to heed it) through the Polish government-in-exile in London. Also, in early 1943, a communist resistance group, the AL ('Armia Ludowa' or 'People's Army') welcomed Jews as members, although by this time almost all Jews had been deported to the camps.

In 1946, Poles in the village of Kielce massacred a number of Jews who had returned to their homes after the war. This incident, and the general anti-Semitism remaining (though somewhat diminished) in Poland, led to the majority of remaining Jews leaving Poland. Because of its shifting borders over the centuries in response to attack by neighbouring powers, Poland had for much of its existence been a multiethnic nation, with ethnic Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Germans and Jews. But its post-World War Two borders left it virtually monoethnic.

Immediately after the war, communist influence and power, solidified in 1948, constructed a view of the Polish nation, the war and anti-Semitism that downplayed the role of the non-communist resistance to Nazism, belittling nationalist organizations such as the AK and the role Zegota had played in rescuing Jews. The communists portrayed themselves as 'the only political force in Poland which had repudiated anti-Semitism and its associated fascist doctrines' (Polonsky, 1990, p. 4). This atmosphere was entirely hostile to any honest confrontation with historic Polish anti-Semitism, and also set opposition to anti-Semitism against national pride and loyalty. In later years, the communist regimes (especially that of Gomulka, from 1956 until 1971) did an about-face, wrapped themselves in national symbols, and used anti-Semitism as an ideological weapon against opponents, further muddying the waters but continuing the discouragement of honest inquiry.¹¹

National memory of the war period tended to focus on Polish victimization and resistance. The distinctly anti-Semitic element in the Nazi scheme and the distinct and disproportionately Jewish (and Polish-Jewish) tragedy was suppressed. It is this national self-understanding of the war, the occupation and the Holocaust that was reflected in the Auschwitz memorial as I saw it in 1989, and in the words of the

Polish minister of culture, at a rededication in 1979 of the Jewish pavilion in Auschwitz I:

Among those doomed, Jews and Poles rank in first place ... Oswiecim [Auschwitz], Treblinka, Chelmno, Plaszow, Belzec, Sobibor, Lodz, Bialystok, and the Warsaw ghetto ... are all stages of extermination, stations of the Cross of Polish Jews. (Young, 1993, p. 131)

The equating of the fate of (non-Jewish) Poles and Jews, the Catholic framing of the Jewish tragedy and the martyrological emphasis all reflected the nationalist and Catholic ways that Polish officialdom, and many Poles, saw Auschwitz and the Holocaust.¹²

Yet Poland was never as closed a society as most of the other Soviet bloc nations, and in the 1970s Polish intellectuals began to look honestly and in depth at the history of Jewish presence in Poland. The Solidarity movement of the 1980s, which eventually brought down the communist government, brought a new respect for Poland in the West—and a new national self-confidence—enabling further examination of Polish/Jewish relations. In 1978, a respected literary scholar, Jan Blonski, published an article entitled ‘The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto’, which called for an honest reckoning with Polish anti-Semitism, a reminder that the Catholic Church had condemned anti-Semitism (in the ‘Nostra Aetate’ document from the Vatican II Council in 1965, see www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/iv_vatican_council/documents), and an affirmation that Poles ‘had the greatest moral obligation towards the Jewish people’ during the Holocaust because the bulk of European Jewry lived there (Blonski, 1990, p. 46). The article was published in *Tygodnik powszechny* (roughly translated as ‘*Common weekly*’), a courageous, independent Catholic intellectual and cultural journal published since the late 1940s, which received an extraordinary response, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, to the article.¹³

The rescue controversy and the focus of moral assessment

These further researches into what amounts to a national rethinking of the Polish role in the Holocaust and under Nazi occupation, and of Polish anti-Semitism and Polish/Jewish history, compelled a revision of my initial reflections on the exchange with Jaska. In the remainder of this article, I want to explore this rethinking in relation both to its implications for civic education in Poland, and for one central issue in moral education.

That some Poles risked great danger to try to save Jewish lives and resist genocide means that Jaska’s ‘What could we do?’ cannot represent the last word in the assignment of responsibility, nor can a mere rejection of ethnic or national stereotyping. Yes, it was terribly risky, but there were things it was possible for individual Poles to do. Commenting on this line of thought, Wladislaw Bartoszewski, a co-founder of Zegota who spent time in various concentration camps, said at a 1988 conference on Polish/Jewish relations and the Holocaust: ‘The Chairman of the discussion has asked whether restricted possibilities justify inaction. No they do not.

A restriction in possibilities does not justify abstention from action' (Polonsky, 1990, p. 209).

David Jones argues that under some conditions, risky though they might have been, there was a positive duty to assist those in danger and need, since what was to be gained—the saving of lives, and resistance to Naziism—was so great. Such acts are to be distinguished from 'supererogatory' ones—good and admirable to do, but not wrong not to do, and therefore not something for which one could be criticized for failing to do (Jones, 1999).

Jones's account implies that one can spell out a set of objective criteria that would allow a determination whether a particular Polish person had a moral obligation to help a Jew, and could be subject to criticism for failing to do so. Yet even accepting, as one should, a general distinction between the obligatory and the supererogatory, it is not clear that one can very readily assign proposed acts to one rather than the other of these two categories. Who can say definitively what is 'too risky' to be an obligation? Some saw risk to one's own life in the face of certain death to the potential rescuee as worth that risk. Jones's totally objectivist account omits the role of personal standing in these matters. Someone, like Bartoszewski, who has himself taken great risks to save Jews, has a certain standing to entreat others to do so with an implication that they are morally required to do so. By contrast, someone who has never faced comparable risks does not have the standing to make this claim on others, or at least has less standing than the rescuer to do so.

This is not merely a point about the social psychology of getting people to take risks for the sake of an important good. It is not only that someone who 'walked the walk' and not just 'talked the talk' is empirically more likely to be able to get others to follow her lead, because she has established a kind of credibility or moral authority in their eyes, than someone who has not. It is that she has actually *achieved* that kind of authority. She is 'in a position to' say that the risks in the situation are outweighed by the rightness or goodness of the action. Part of my own response to Jaska's explanation and defence of Polish behaviour was related to my own standing, as I mentioned above. Having never been in a position remotely akin to the Polish villagers in the town surrounding Auschwitz, under the oppressive thumb of the Nazi occupying force, yet aware of what was happening to the Jews at Auschwitz, I could not sit in judgement of their behaviour, and I could not proffer a condemnatory judgement to Jaska herself. It would, I think, have been wrong and arrogant to do so.

There is, however, a different kind of limitation to Jaska's defence of the Poles. Jerzy Turowicz, the editor for several decades of *Tygodnik powszechny*, comments in an article following the controversy generated by the article by Blonski:

If we had not had such anti-Semitism in Poland before the war, perhaps we would still have been unable to save many more Jewish lives; but our attitude to their extermination, which was taking place before our eyes, would have been different. We would not have had that sometimes very evident indifference, or those inhuman and unchristian responses of the type: 'Hitler has solved the Jewish question for us'. (Turowicz, 1990, p. 141)

Turowicz suggests that it is not only behaviour that is of moral concern, but feelings and attitudes as well. This is not a matter of condemning persons merely for the thoughts that come into their heads. No doubt there were some Poles (as perhaps Christian nationals of any occupied country in Europe) whose hostility to Jews before the war led them to thoughts similar to 'Hitler has solved the Jewish question for us', but who, in the context of the mass murder that they recognized to be taking place, recoiled from such thoughts, and repudiated them to whatever extent they were capable. Indeed, a small number of avowed Polish anti-Semites became involved in rescue activities to disassociate themselves from the murderous consequences of German anti-Semitism yet without abandoning lesser modes of anti-Semitism (Tec, 1986, Ch. 6).¹⁴

It is not those who feel ashamed and repudiate vicious anti-Semitic thoughts whom Turowicz describes here, but those who identify with them, though engaging in no shameful actions. Even if the Poles whom Jaska had in mind did do everything they could, we would still care, and would think it morally appropriate to care, about what they thought and felt (in the sense explained) about the massacre of the Jews. Were they deeply regretful that they could not help? Did they seek out various possibilities before concluding that nothing more could be done?

Why does it matter morally what people feel?

But *why* is it morally appropriate what people feel, not just what they do? Ewa Berberyusz, a Polish journalist associated with *Tygodnik powszechny*, suggests part of an answer: 'If more of us had turned out to be more Christian, it would have made no difference to the statistics of the extermination, but maybe it would not have been such a lonely death?' (Berberyusz, 1990a, p. 70).

There is an important moral truth here. As human beings, we care not only about what people do for and to us, but how they feel about us; and their concern or its absence can be particularly heightened in certain situations. To members of a stigmatized and persecuted group, that others make clear that they regard one as a fellow human being or a fellow citizen equal to themselves, can be deeply affirming, apart from any concrete actions they take on your behalf. In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi documents the state of degradation and depravity to which the inmates, himself included, had been reduced by their treatment by the SS and the camp system. But a civilian worker employed in the factory in which Levi worked, a fellow Italian and a non-Jew, helps Levi out. Levi is deeply grateful not only for the help (in getting extra food primarily, since prisoners in Auschwitz were in a continual state of near-starvation), but equally for the affirmation that he is indeed a human being (Levi, 1993, p. 119).¹⁵

To make this general point is not, however, to provide guidelines for the moral assessment of attitudes in particular situations. The need for such further inquiry is suggested by some remarks of Bartoszewski: 'One can debate as to what extent they [the Poles] sympathized with the victims. It is my conviction that a cheap sympathy was general, one that did not imply any responsibility. That is: "Isn't it terrible,

unpleasant, painful.” An expensive sympathy was quite rare’ (p. 210). Mere sympathy is too tepid a response to persecution and murder. Bartoszewski ties the seriousness of the emotion to the willingness to act on it. Perhaps this is too stringent, since action may not be possible, yet emotion or attitude of a morally substantial character may be. An example of a (retrospective) emotion equal to the situation is expressed by Berberysz: ‘I would like to say that the absence of Jews, whom I still remember but who are now gone, leaves me, for one, with a sense of irreplaceable loss’ (Berberysz, 1990b, p. 108).

Even if we can come up with guidelines for morally significant emotions (in relation to a given situation), a sharp distinction between action and emotion is not always possible. The actions of some are influenced by the attitudes of others. Teresa Prekerowa, a Polish historian, contrasts outright anti-Semites who, because of their antipathy to Jews, turned their neighbours in for sheltering Jews with another group of Poles who acted from greed in blackmailing Jewish fugitives (sometimes turning them in after extorting money from them), rather than out of Jew-hatred. Of the latter, Prekerowa comments, ‘nevertheless, the lack of sympathetic interest in the fate of Jews on the part of the surrounding population facilitated the commission of the crime’ (p. 75).¹⁶ Prekerowa thereby implicitly challenges Turowicz’s implication that the extent of help was largely independent of the degree of anti-Semitism. If one could trust that one’s neighbour was likely to be sympathetic to the sheltering of Jews, one would be under a not insignificantly diminished risk for sheltering Jews.¹⁷ Of course, one is dealing here not with mere feeling or attitude, but feeling bound up with behavioural disposition—whether one’s neighbour would be inclined to turn one in for sheltering a fugitive. But Prekerowa’s point can be broadened beyond such dispositions. The attitudes of those around us shape our sense of what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, what is to be expected and what is too much to expect. In the now famous case of the French town of Le Chambon, where approximately five thousand inhabitants sheltered an equal number of Jews, spiritual leaders of the town helped to shape a moral climate in which abandoning vulnerable Jews to their Nazi fate was regarded as simply morally unthinkable (Hallie, 1979; Blum, 1994b).¹⁸

From the Polish debate about the Holocaust, I have chosen to focus on one among a number of more general issues concerning morality and moral education that this debate suggests—that attitudes and feelings are morally important in their own right as well as because they affect the actions of others, and of the agent his/herself.¹⁹ In doing so, I mean to do no more than suggest the vast field of concerns that a study of the Holocaust in its many dimensions raises for moral educators.

Conclusion

These reflections do not lead me to condone the Holocaust survivor’s remark to Jaska. But I think there must be a context that would be appropriate for me to sit down with Jaska and respectfully invite her own reflections on the national debate

and self-examination in which many Poles have engaged. There must be an appropriate way for a non-Pole to engage in such a conversation, moral educator to moral educator, without adopting an inappropriate stance of condemnation and without stereotyping.

More generally, these experiences suggest that there is an inescapably group-particularistic dimension to the deep moral and civic issues related to Jews, Poles, the Holocaust and Auschwitz. Historical museums are sometimes called upon to address both universal and national civic issues of morality. Genocide presents one of those universal issues. A cold recounting of the facts of genocide is not adequate to the task. There must be some attempt to highlight the human destruction, to invite the museum's visitors to imaginatively envision the human beings whose lives were lost. To do so involves engagement with the emotions as well as the intellect and the faculty of moral judgement. Ideally, guides at such museums are made aware of these moral dimensions of their task and are trained as well to be sensitive to the different levels of knowledge and different personal relationships to the events memorialized, that different visitor groups bring to the experience.

The analogy between museum guides and classroom teachers should not be overstated here. The teacher has an ongoing responsibility for the pupil; the guide's relation to the visitor ends after a few hours. The challenges of teaching about genocide, or the Holocaust in particular, are nevertheless daunting. Yet we know they can be met. Facing History and Ourselves, a professional development organization grounded in a Nazi/Holocaust curriculum, has been training thousands of teachers in the US and Europe, for over two decades, how to make this material meaningful to 12- to 18-year-olds, how to engage pupils in morally serious exploration, and how to develop their civic and moral sensitivities and commitments.²⁰

My reflections here do not constitute a systematic inquiry into Holocaust education as a project in moral education. I hope only to have suggested some of the complexities and desiderata of such an enterprise, to help us recognize both the particularities of national and other particularistic groups' relation to these issues, as well as the inescapably universal dimension.

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Notes

1. Edification is not the only purpose of a visit to Auschwitz. Some visitors go as a kind of pilgrimage to a sacred site, to honour the dead. So the Memorial and Museum's purposes are not confined to the educational. Occasional signs at the site—for example, at a gas chamber—remind the visitor to pay respect to those who died, for example, by observing a rule of silence, in recognition of this dimension of the visitor's experience.
2. One responsible account of the deaths of Gypsies in the Holocaust is that between 130,000

and 285,000 were murdered, from a pre-war population of 947,000 (Niewyk, 2003, p. xxv). Niewyk comments, 'Statistics on Gypsy losses are especially unreliable and controversial' (Niewyk, 2003, p. xxv).

3. Poles and Soviet POWs were the primary inmates of Auschwitz I from 1940, when the camp opened, until 1942, when Jews began to arrive in large numbers, most to be killed immediately.
4. *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985).
5. The literal translation of Levi's Italian title is *If this is a man* (and this is the translation given to the British version). The difference between the two translations is significant. The book is not framed as a story about survival, as the American title implies, but as a meditation on whether the inmates of Auschwitz, Levi himself included, had themselves become something less than human.
6. See Terrence Des Pres's discussion of 'excremental assault' as a deliberate strategy of degradation by the SS (Des Pres 1976, Ch. 3).
7. In addition, as several of the members of my AME tour group pointed out, a guide needed some way of confronting these atrocities day after day without breaking down emotionally themselves. Jaska told us that in the peak summer months, she did one tour per day (lasting about 3 hours), and had to take days off just to manage emotionally. Her emotionally distant manner was surely part of Jaska's personal strategy (conscious or not) for handling her job emotionally.
8. James Young, commenting on the Auschwitz memorial in the early 1990s, observes: 'Nowhere among this debris do we find traces of what bound these people together into a civilization, a nation, a culture' (Young, 1993, p. 132).
9. Adam Michnik, a Polish intellectual and Solidarity movement leader in the 1980s, articulates an important part of the complex comparative framework I am suggesting in these remarks: 'For many years after the war, Poles grieved over the fate of their murdered compatriots without acknowledging that the fate of their Jewish neighbours was incomparably more tragic—an utterly exceptional tragedy in the history of humanity. On the other hand, there has prevailed among Jews ... a triumphalism of pain, as though Jews decided that only the Jewish tragedy was worthy of preservation in the consciousness' (Michnik, 2001, p. 22). The complex moral and philosophical issues surrounding the claim that the Holocaust is 'unique' are discussed in Alan Rosenbaum's collection, *Is the Holocaust unique?*
10. Jaska had told us about the underground plot in late 1944 by the Sonderkommando and a few of the female prisoners to blow up two of the crematoria. The plot was aborted but these prisoners had managed to set one of the crematoria on fire and it was never again able to operate.
11. The late 1960s were a nadir in official anti-Semitism in Poland. There was a purge of Jews (or those of Jewish ancestry, many of whom were entirely assimilated, or barely Jewish identified) from the Communist Party and the government, and most Jews still living in Poland left at this time.
12. For a sense of numerical comparison, according to the official website of the Museum, 1.1 million Jews, 140,000 Poles, 20,000 Gypsies, 10,000 Soviet POWs, and 10,000 prisoners of other nationalities were inmates in Auschwitz. See: www.auschwitz.org.pl/htm/eng/historia_KL/uczba_narodowsc_ofiar_ok.html
13. Blonski's article and some of the most important Polish responses to it, in the pages of *Tygodnik powszechny* and elsewhere, are collected in Antony Polonsky's *My brother's keeper: recent Polish debates on the Holocaust* (1990). This is an indispensable volume on the issues discussed in this paper. It includes an edited transcript of a discussion among Polish and Jewish academics and intellectuals of the controversy prompted by Blonski's article, in Jerusalem in February, 1988.
14. Tec cites one such Polish rescuer as saying 'It is one thing to help an underdog and another to consider him as an equal. As long as the Jews were persecuted one could help them, but when they wanted to become equal to the Christian, this is quite a different matter' (p. 107).

15. Bernard Williams, the British moral philosopher, brought up the moral importance of emotions in an early and influential essay, 'Morality and the emotions', in which he noted that sometimes we need a 'human gesture' from the other, rather than action founded on principle or conscientiousness (Williams, 1973, p. 227).
16. In fact, after September 1943 (when almost all of the Polish Jews had been deported to death camps, but several thousands were still being sheltered by Poles), the Polish underground began to sentence these extortionists to death. (Prekerowa, 1990, p. 75).
17. In many parts of occupied Poland, the penalty for Poles helping Jews was death, especially in the 'General-Government', the German-ruled area. For example, the following is from a decree by the Chief of the SS and Police for the Warsaw region: 'Not only Jews leaving the Jewish district will be sentenced to death, but also anyone helping them hide in whatever way.' (Kakol, 1990, p. 149).
18. Further exploration of the motivations of those who engaged in rescue activities during the Holocaust must begin with Samuel and Pearl Oliner, *The altruistic personality* (1988).
19. Within moral philosophy, Iris Murdoch is perhaps the most prominent recent exponent of the view that it is not only outward behaviour but the inner life of thought and feeling that is part of moral life and character (Murdoch, 1970), although subsequent work in the neo-Aristotelian 'virtue ethics' tradition has developed this insight more systematically.
20. Facing History and Ourselves was founded in 1976 and has reached approximately 18,000 educators through its workshops and institutes (this author included), mostly in secondary school settings. Its URL is www.facing.org.

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