

Jewish Revival in Contemporary Poland: Extending National Boundaries through the Symbolic Other

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Abstract:

Jewishness is a topic of major controversy in Poland. The antisemitic discourse of the conservative party frames Jews as antagonistic to Poles and symbolic of all that endangers national identity. In this context, pro-Jewishness, manifest as renewed interest in Jewish culture, is often perceived as resistance to narrow understandings of the Polish nation and an expression of liberal longings for a more pluralistic society. The author investigates the link between Jewish revival and national struggles, probing the interests behind the project. Can it be understood as political activism, and if so, activism for whom: Poles, Jews, or both? What are the risks and potential outcomes of this alignment of interests? By focusing on heritage work in the Kazimierz neighbourhood in Kraków, this article challenges the optimism of major works on Jewish revival in Poland, arguing that pro-Jewishness objectifies the Other. By drawing on scholarly theories and her own experience, the author conceptualises Jewish revival as a nation-building project that idealises the Jew as a symbol of wider minority struggles. The revival, however, still creates opportunities for Polish-Jewish encounters that are crucial to transcending ideological antagonisms and advancing dialogue. For this reason, while the project should not be idealised, it should nonetheless be seen in a positive light.

Keywords:

Jews, pro-Jewishness, Poland, anti-Semitism, Kazimierz, Kraków, Polish-Jewish encounters

Introduction

Stanisław Krajewski: I have an impression that, by idealizing the old Poland, the young simply express their dissatisfaction with things as they are now. One is inclined to think sentimentally of old times and, curiously, Jews have come to symbolize them. Jews have suddenly become a symbol of the old Poland, the better Poland. This view seems to me as widespread as anti-semitism.¹

Stanisław Krajewski is a Polish philosopher and a prominent activist for the Jewish minority, specialising in Polish-Jewish relations. I begin my article with his words which greatly advanced my understanding of what Jewishness means in contemporary Poland, words which critique an approach which I myself shared for a lengthy period of time. As a young Pole who self-identifies as left-wing and progressive, I am outraged by the discriminatory politics of the right-wing Law and Justice government, and I am an eager participant in projects that oppose the ethno-nationalist narrative. In the summer of 2021, I volunteered for the Jewish Culture Festival in the Polish city of Kraków, an initiative that aims to challenge antisemitic discourse and promote cross-cultural dialogue. The Festival, located in the historically Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, is a week-long celebration of contemporary art and progressive ideas, self-defined as ‘the most old-school, radical, avant-garde festival of Jewish culture in the world’.² In 2021, for the first time in its decades-long history, the Festival partnered with the European Union and launched a month-long volunteering project, bringing together youth of various nationalities, including Polish and Israeli.

In order to grasp the significance of such a project, one must be aware of the complex history of Polish-Jewish relations. According to Zubrzycki³, Jews were a key minority in pre-partition Poland and enjoyed relative tolerance when Poland was an independent state. However, during the occupation period from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, Poles began to perceive Jews as a threat to national cohesion and tensions grew⁴, resulting in the overt anti-semitism of the twentieth century, which often led to open collaboration with the

¹ Anthony Polonsky, *‘My Brother’s Keeper?’: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 108.

² Jewish Culture Festival (2022) <<https://www.jewishfestival.pl/en/jewish-culture-festival/>> [accessed 17 February 2022]

³ Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 39-51.

⁴ Zubrzycki, pp. 51-55.

occupier during the Holocaust.⁵ This part of history was silenced after the war since it did not support the popular narrative of a suffering and heroic Polish nation. Neither the post-war government nor the governments of the post-independence period had any interest in contesting antisemitism; in fact, they exploited the prevailing climate by placing Polish identity in opposition with Jewishness and portraying themselves as protectors against the common national enemy.⁶ This antisemitic climate lingers to this day, for which reason many perceive the renewed interest in Jewish culture as an attempt to challenge the Polish 'nationalised' view on history and to initiate Polish-Jewish dialogue.

Initially, I was deeply enchanted by the Festival which I admired as an expression of my longing for a more liberal Poland. As a consequence of the governing party's antisemitic discourse, it felt transgressive and liberating not only to openly celebrate Jewish culture, but to do so with Jews themselves. It was not long, however, until my excitement began to cause me discomfort. In an eye-opening conversation, my Israeli friend admitted that they often felt objectified by the Poles involved in the Jewish revival, as if they were the project's treasure whose value lay exclusively in being Jewish. This exchange made me realise my own mistake of idealising the Jewish revival. Only once my political aspirations no longer steered my focus, was I able to establish meaningful connections and appreciate Jewish culture for what it truly is: a rich culture in its own right.

The meanings attributed to Jewishness became a barrier to Polish-Jewish understanding. If one of the primary aims of the Festival was to normalise difference, why did my Jewish friend feel that their difference was being emphasised in a discomfoting way? In order to better understand the complexities of the Jewish revival, I turned to the works of Erica Lehrer, an American anthropologist specialising in post-Holocaust Jewish culture. Lehrer proved particularly helpful as a guide for my analysis since she conducted her own research in Kazimierz, the very neighbourhood in which the annual Festival is held. In her ethnography, Lehrer conceptualises Jewish heritage as an expression of ethnic difference cultivated by heritage activists; namely, progressive Poles who long for a more open society. I will refer to these actors as heritage activists, relying on a definition of activism as 'critique, invention, and creative practice' as formulated by Naisargi, an anthropologist specialising in activist ethics.⁷ Heritage activists, then, critique the narrowness of Polish national identity, invent an inclusive

⁵ Polonsky, *My Brother's Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, p. 15.

⁶ See Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 2006).

⁷ Naisargi N. Dave, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (New York: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 3.

alternative, and enact it through their work in Kazimierz, thereby conceiving of the Jewish revival as a means to change Polish society for the better.

Although Lehrer's analysis of heritage work as activism helped me to grasp the sense of 'bottom-up' resistance in the neighbourhood, her optimistic tone left me dissatisfied. According to Lehrer, Kazimierz sites serve as 'conciliatory heritage' advancing Polish-Jewish dialogue by shaping "in-between" individuals who embrace a hybrid Polish-Jewish identity, which resists homogenising nationalisms on both sides'.⁸ In other words, the author characterises Poles involved in the Jewish revival as transcending the constraining ideologies of homogeneous Polishness and meeting Jews 'in-between', thus allowing for an interaction free from the weight of nationalised identity politics. In doing so, however, Lehrer does not reflect on the risks involved in this process, focusing only on the positive aspects of the Jewish revival. Perhaps this can be accounted for by the period during which she conducted her fieldwork — the early 2000s — before the ascension of the Law and Justice government and their nationalist agenda. The radicalisation of attitudes under the Law and Justice government led to intensified resistance, making it more likely that Poles identify in Polish-Jewish interactions. I intend to retest Lehrer's ideas about the Jewish revival in light of recent political developments in Poland, arguing that a redefinition of the national category through the category of the Other carries significant risk.

The scholar who facilitated my articulation of this view is Genevieve Zubrzycki, a Canadian cultural sociologist in Polish national identity and collective memory. Like Lehrer, Zubrzycki approaches the Jewish revival as the enactment of aspirations for a more pluralistic society. Contrary to the American anthropologist, Zubrzycki perceives the project in a rather negative light; she locates nationhood at the core of the endeavour, identifying the goal of revival in liberal political aims to emerge at the expense of Polish-Jewish dialogue. In doing so, Zubrzycki reveals that Jewishness is instrumentalised not only by the political right but also by their progressive opponents, who aspire to reclaim nationhood by redefining the Jewish Other as the 'Ideal Indigenous Other' which contrasts the 'Threatening Other' of conservative discourse.

We are presented with two contrasting approaches to Jewish revival in Poland: for Lehrer, its pro-Jewishness is an entirely positive phenomenon challenging the antisemitic objectification of the Jew and inspiring a more inclusive understanding; Zubrzycki, on the

⁸ Erica T. Lehrer, *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 24.

other hand, suggests that pro-Jewishness also objectifies the Other, since only by remaining an idealised symbol can the Jew fulfil its role of Jewishness in Polish nation-building for these activists. By considering wider anthropological debates on nationalism, this discussion sheds light on the role of the Other in determining national boundaries. The example of the Jewish revival demonstrates that the nation does not always construct itself in opposition to Otherness, but can also rely on its inclusion. In other words, the national category does not have to be defined *against* the Other, but it can also be defined *through* the Other. Importantly, within the context of the Lehrer-Zubrzycki opposition, ideologies of inclusivity do not necessarily 'de-Other' the Other but can also instrumentalise its difference to enact a more pluralistic version of the nation. Nationhood is an ongoing and complex debate, comprised of different elements, and Otherness can be one of them. Since this understanding of the nation is crucial to my argument, I will contextualise it within dominant theories of nationalism.

According to anthropologists Barnard and Spencer the practice of classifying people according to their nationhood was so widespread in the twentieth century that scholars long perceived it to be a self-evident aspect of the world.⁹ This approach was subsequently challenged by theorists Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, both of whom emphasised nationhood as a social construct. In his major work, *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner defines nationalism as a 'theory of political legitimacy', whereby a nation is a political unit founded on the ideas of shared membership and mutual responsibility.¹⁰ Gellner emphasises the voluntary aspect of nationhood, suggesting that a nation can be sustained only by the will of its people to recognise one other as co-nationals.¹¹ In other words, it is a mutual recognition as co-nationals, rather than defined shared characteristics, that makes people belong to a nation. Anderson advances this idea in his influential text, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, conceptualising the nation as an 'imagined political community' preserved in the collective imagination of its members.¹² Nations are imagined, Anderson argues, since one cannot meet all of their co-nationals; one can only imagine them to exist and to be affiliated by certain characteristics such as skin colour, ancestry, and shared territory.

⁹ Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer, *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 515-16.

¹⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 1.

¹¹ Gellner, p. 7.

¹² Benedict R. O. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 3rd edn (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]), p. 6.

These characteristics are not fixed markers of nationhood, but must be recognised as meaningful by individuals. In Poland, ethnicity is the defining marker of national identity only because it is *given* a defining meaning. When discussing ethno-nationalist politics in Poland, I mean the version of nationalism according to which ethnicity is naturalised as its primary characteristic. This understanding is inspired by Anthony Smith, a student of Gellner and one of the founders of nationalism studies, who focuses on the relationship between nationalism and ethnicity, and formulates an influential definition of ethno-nationalism. According to Smith, ethnic nationalisms are ‘oriented to the culture of the chosen unit, [...] interested in the survival of the group’s cultural identity, desiring self-government as an end and as a means to that survival’.¹³ In other words, according to ethno-nationalism, the symbolic boundaries of nationhood are constructed along ethnic lines, and it is the role of the government to protect them. As Smith suggests, the ethnic model of nationalism has dominated Eastern Europe in opposition to civic nationalism dominant in Western Europe, which prioritises political and territorial belonging over ethnic ties. I will draw upon Smith’s ethnic-civic distinction, employing it as a theoretical framework for understanding debates regarding Polish identity.

Although certain understandings of nationhood are promoted and naturalised in dominant discourse, the formation of a nation’s symbolic boundaries relies on its members’ collective imagination. The ideas of Anderson, Gellner, and Smith are of crucial importance to contextualising the Lehrer-Zubrzycki debate. Polishness, as an imagined category, should be recognised as defined by its members, and thus subject to continuous contestation. As Zubrzycki argues, Polishness is a ‘work in progress’ rather than an historical fact; it is ‘a crossroads where diverse discourses and practices intersect’ and the Jewish revival is an example of such intersection.¹⁴ Among these discourses are discourses of Otherness; not only those that antagonise the Other, but also those that encompass the Other to expand the symbolic boundaries of the nation.

Although Zubrzycki’s emphasis on nation-building greatly advanced my understanding of the symbolic value of Jewishness, it did so only in light of Lehrer’s ethnographic material. As Zubrzycki articulates her theory in a short, sociological article, it lacks the multi-layered analysis which an in-depth ethnographic case study allows; it does not account for the complexity of ways in which the revival manifests itself in individual lives and interpersonal encounters. In light of this, I will combine the perspectives of Lehrer and Zubrzycki, exploring the analytical gaps of both approaches to present a detailed investigation of both the

¹³ Anthony D. Smith, ‘Theories and types of nationalism’ *European Journal of Sociology*, 10 (1969), 119–32 (p. 126).

¹⁴ Lehrer, pp. 24-25.

possibilities and risks of the revitalisation of Jewish life in Poland. An empirical focus on heritage enriches my argument as it sheds light on the specific interests of heritage activists and the variety of influences that their work can exert. My analysis is informed by the idea of 'difficult heritage' formulated by anthropologist Sharon Macdonald who emphasises its link to social identity. The framework of 'difficult heritage' according to which heritage disrupts dominant notions of collective identity greatly enriches the study of Kazimierz, since it places focus upon the ideological potential of physical spaces.

In this article, I will firstly introduce the revitalised neighbourhood of Kazimierz, the specific example in which my analysis is grounded. By combining Lehrer's ethnography with other works on the neighbourhood, I approach heritage activism in Kazimierz as a politically motivated symbolic practice, which aims to produce a counter-narrative to the ethno-nationalist politics of the governing party. Secondly, I locate the roots of the Kazimierz dynamics in a wider debate regarding the preferred model of Polish nationhood. This historical outline uncovers the background of contemporary approaches, contextualising the identity claims of heritage activists. Finally, I investigate the possibilities and risks of the Jewish revival, challenging both Lehrer's optimism and Zubrzycki's pessimism. The revival, despite cultivating the symbolism of the Other for its political goals, nonetheless creates spaces which make encountering difference possible, advancing efforts towards a more inclusive society.

The value of this discussion lies in three main areas: firstly, it demonstrates the creative ways in which national boundaries can be extended to challenge the conception of a homogeneous nation, exposing the central role of symbolic categories in this process. Secondly, it sheds light on the crucial function of material heritage in the process of identity-building, emphasising its ideological value. Thirdly, it encourages a critical approach towards progressive, dialogue-oriented projects, warning against naive ideologies of inclusivity.

Kazimierz

Living Space in a Landscape of Death



Figure 1: The well-preserved High Synagogue, currently a site for exhibitions and other cultural events



Figure 2: A pro-Jewish mural in Kazimierz, depicting the Jew as an integral element of the city landscape



Figure 4: A Jewish-themed mural on a house that formerly belonged to a Jewish family, with the aim to accentuate the Jewish identity of the neighbourhood

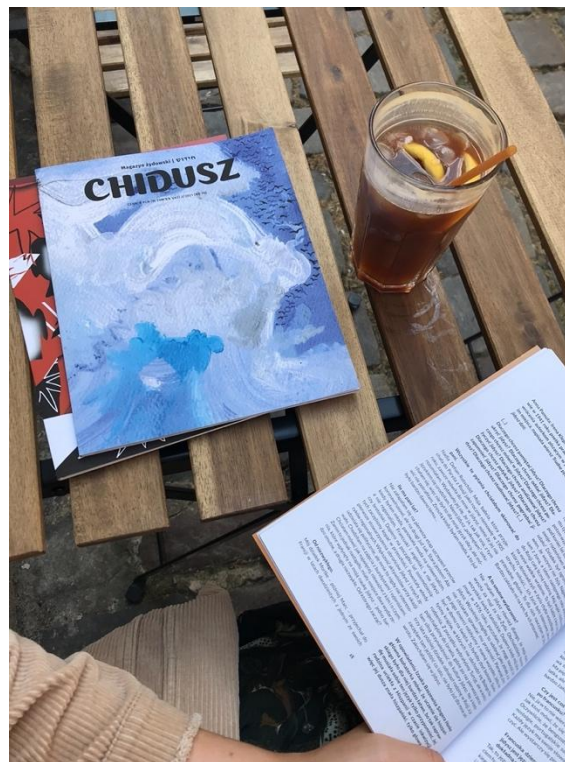


Figure 3: A stack of art magazines on a Polish-Jewish life, available at an independent café in Kazimierz

The neighbourhood of Kazimierz was inhabited by the Jewish community for eight centuries before most of its population was exterminated in the Holocaust.¹⁵ Kazimierz was not only home to the largest Jewish minority in Poland, but it was also one of the most vibrant centres of Jewish intellectual and cultural life globally, enjoying great prestige in the Jewish world.¹⁶ Due to its long and outstanding history, the quarter contained a plethora of Jewish sites such as synagogues, cemeteries, and yeshivas,¹⁷ many of which survive to this day. Such an environment is unusual in Poland, as most Jewish sites were destroyed during the twentieth century, turning the country into ‘a void punctuated only by “the camps”’.¹⁸ It is important to

¹⁵ Michał Galas and Antony Polonsky, ‘Introduction’, in *Jews in Krakow*, Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, 34 vols (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), xxiii, 4-46.

¹⁶ Galas and Polonsky, p. 6.

¹⁷ Yeshivas are Jewish schools focused on the study of religious texts.

¹⁸ Lehrer, p. 3.

note that such destruction and neglect took place not only during the war but also under various post-war governments in pursuit of their political interests, as Holocaust researchers, Tych and Adamczyk-Grabowska, suggest.¹⁹ Both under Communism and during the post-independence period, silencing the Jewish-Polish past proved to be convenient for those in power.

Due to these efforts to suppress the memory of shared Polish-Jewish history, Jewish heritage in Poland can be understood as ‘difficult heritage’; that is, heritage that ‘unsettles cultural assumptions [...] about identity and memory, and past, present and future’.²⁰ Kazimierz, as a vast complex of well-preserved Jewish sites, serves as historical proof of the Polish-Jewish past. It turns abstract and easily manipulatable ideas about the past into tangible, irrefutable evidence, thus threatening the legitimacy of national narratives that dismiss an understanding of Poles and Jews as centuries-long neighbours.

The Kazimierz heritage is exceptional in large part, in contrast with many other historically Jewish spaces, because it is cultivated, cherished, and full of life. According to Gryta, a Holocaust historian and researcher on Kazimierz, the sites are so well-preserved thanks to the work of local activists who resisted the Communist government’s efforts to erase the Jewish past from collective memory. Activists based in Kraków were involved in producing alternative understandings to the post-war, ethno-nationalist version of Poland’s history, and heritage work fulfilled a crucial role in these efforts.²¹ Especially from the 1980s onwards, local museums, heritage preservationists, architects, and other actors became actively involved in revitalising the district, engaging in ‘attempts at symbolically bringing back the Jew’.²²

From initiating exhibitions and publications about Jews from Kazimierz to creating Jewish-themed venues, restaurants, and cafés, heritage activists developed space for

¹⁹ See Tych Feliks and Monika Adamczyk-Grabowska, *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944-2010* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, International Institute for Holocaust Research, Diana Zborowski Center for the Study of the Aftermath of the Shoah, 2014).

²⁰ Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), p. 1.

²¹ Janek Gryta, ‘Remembering the Holocaust and the Jewish Past in Kraków, 1980-2013’ (doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2017), <https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/54589774/FULL_TEXT.PDF> [accessed 20 February 2022], p. 11.

²² Gryta, p. 46.

personal engagement with heritage. Most buildings were renovated to host cultural events (see Figure 1) and many urban artists created works which accentuated the neighbourhood's Jewish identity, such as murals portraying the Jew as an integral and welcome figure of Kazimierz (see Figures 2 and 4). Kazimierz also supported many small, independent initiatives, such as the art magazine *Chidusz* specialising in Polish-Jewish culture as 'culture-in-the-making' (see Figure 3).

The neighbourhood grew popular among visitors from Poland and abroad. The major event of the Jewish revival, the Jewish Culture Festival, has taken place for over thirty years and attracts tens of thousands of participants annually. Consequently, according to Lehrer, 'Kazimierz venues are [...] perceived as a living space in what visiting foreign Jews otherwise encounter largely as a landscape of death'.²³ Surrounded by synagogues busy with visitors and Klezmer²⁴ music from hospitality venues, one truly has the impression that the Jewish chapter in Poland is still being written.

Whose Space?

The revitalisation of Kazimierz encountered considerable criticism, both in Jewish and Polish circles. The cultivation of the Jewish district by non-Jews did not appeal to many in the Jewish community who disapproved of its commodification and even called Kazimierz a 'Jewish Disneyland'.²⁵ As the main function of its idyllic aesthetic was to offer relief from the memory of the Holocaust and the disappointing reality of the 1990s, some accused it of escapism and even denialism.²⁶ However, rather than approaching these sites exclusively in themselves as isolated material entities, one should also inquire as to the reflections they provoke and the encounters they enable. As Lehrer argues, 'the practice of heritage produces not only "heritage" itself [...] but also particular kinds of social space and relations among those who engage with that heritage'.²⁷ In other words, heritage encompasses possibilities for the individual that extend far beyond immediate perception. As Macdonald suggests, the meanings that people assign to buildings simultaneously attribute buildings with a form of agency, that is, an ability to shape social action.²⁸ It is therefore the relationship between people and buildings that should be the focus of researchers. With this in mind, I analyse

²³ Lehrer, p. 138.

²⁴ Klezmer is the traditional folk music of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe.

²⁵ Lehrer, p. 32.

²⁶ Gryta, p. 64.

²⁷ Lehrer, p. 11.

²⁸ Macdonald, p. 26.

Kazimierz as an attempt to create a 'Jewish space', enquiring into the variety of influences that heritage can exert on an individual.²⁹

It is in the context of the discussion of 'Jewish spaces' in Poland that Lehrer expresses a sense of optimism towards the revival, an optimism that I call into question by arguing that it oversimplifies the revival's relationship to nationhood and power. In her analysis of 'Jewish spaces' and their potential to produce counter-narratives to dominant discourse, Lehrer goes as far as to argue that structures of power are more or less resisted in the neighbourhood.³⁰ She defines Kazimierz as a place of 'vitality' and 'possibility' somehow free from the usual constraints of ethnic and national categories.³¹ Her argument is based on an analysis of Polish-Jewish encounters which frames Kazimierz as 'conciliatory heritage' i.e. heritage that challenges the view that Polish and Jewish identities are incommensurable since they are rooted in major disagreements about the past.³² In other words, according to Lehrer, a sort of vacant space is created which allows for a unifying experience as both Poles and Jews put their identities into question when entering dialogue. The author suggests that Kazimierz embodies the anarchist idea of a 'Temporary Autonomous Zone': an area that fulfils dreams of 'free culture' and defies the structures of authority. Kazimierz is defined as an example of 'cultural anarchy', 'existing for a time beyond the constraints of definition'.³³ Following Lehrer's line of thought, heritage activism in Kazimierz creates a utopian space where national identification no longer constrains individuals in their encounters with others.

I argue, however, that rather than being 'category-defying' individuals, activists respond to existing categories and redefine their boundaries according to their own aspirations.³⁴ They do not enter a 'conciliatory space' free from identity politics; rather, they reinvent politics through a redefinition of the symbolism of Jewishness. One cannot simultaneously idealise and normalise the Jew, and it does not lie in the activists' interests to strip Jewishness of its symbolic potential. I will now advance this argument, revealing a direct relationship between the Jewish revival in Kazimierz and claims to a particular version of Polishness.

Space for Jews as Space for Difference

²⁹ Lehrer, p. 2.

³⁰ Lehrer, p. 24.

³¹ Lehrer, pp. 208-09.

³² Lehrer, p. 17.

³³ Lehrer, p. 204.

³⁴ Lehrer, p. 184.



Figure 5: A pro-LGBT+ rainbow flag in the window of the Jewish Community Centre



Figure 6: A pro-women's rights posters of the Jewish Culture Festival



Figure 7: A rabbi delivering a lecture on the symbolism of a rainbow during the Jewish Culture Festival

The Jewish character of Kazimierz represents concerns that extend far beyond the theme of Jewishness in itself. This is revealed by analysing the history of the quarter's revitalisation and present engagement with its heritage. As Macdonald suggests, 'difficult heritage' often serves as a 'moral compass' for post-conflict communities, reflecting the direction they wish to take and figuring as a metaphor for their new identity.³⁵ Kazimierz, the material reminder of an oppressed minority, historically came to represent minority interests generally, becoming a counter-space to dominant narratives. Lehrer identifies such heritage as 'minority heritage', describing it as a space that can make alternative identities more accessible.³⁶

Kazimierz fulfils a similar role to this day, attracting individuals largely excluded from mainstream Polish society, such as the members of the LGBTQIA+ community. As Jewish journalist Ruth Gruber notes, 'the district consciously forms a sort of "Jewish zone" where different rules from the rest of the city — or country — may apply', creating a safe space for

³⁵ Macdonald, p. 100.

³⁶ Lehrer, p. 213.

those otherwise discriminated against by the general public.³⁷ The quarter is known for its variety of gay venues, and intersections between Jewish and gay circles are highly common. Rainbow flags frequent appear in places such as in the Jewish Community Centre, the largest educational and cultural Jewish centre in Kraków (see Figure 5). Although the interests of minorities have changed over time, the quarter's strong affiliation with these groups has not wavered. 'If there is space for Jews, there is space for difference', Lehrer suggests, underlining the neighbourhood's willingness to embrace otherness.³⁸

While Lehrer remarks upon the relation between Jewishness and discriminated minorities in Poland, she does not problematise this connection, perhaps because it was not as prevalent at the time of her writing as it is today. Her monograph was published in 2013, prior to the highly conservative and discriminatory Law and Justice party's ascension to power. Even though sexual minorities and women were discriminated against under previous governments, it was the Law and Justice party that explicitly excluded the LGBTQIA+ and feminist communities from the state-sponsored category of Polishness. As discrimination intensified, so did oppositional efforts to support the affected Poles, and the Kazimierz neighbourhood with its 'minority heritage' was greatly involved in these efforts. For instance, the 2021 edition of the Jewish Culture Festival highlighted LGBTQIA+ and feminist themes, expressing solidarity with minorities and disapproval of the government's discriminatory actions. The programme included the distribution of pro-women's rights posters around the neighbourhood and lectures about sexual minorities (see Figures 6 and 7). The present-day affiliation with minority interests is a clear example of the reification of Jewishness, which can have an adverse impact upon Polish-Jewish dialogue, as I will discuss in the final section.

In this section, I have introduced the Kazimierz neighbourhood, describing the history of its revitalisation and present-day engagement with its heritage. As a 'difficult heritage', Kazimierz carries complex political and ideological significations, serving as a counter-narrative to state-sponsored views of Polish history and identity. However, I challenge Lehrer's contention that the main focus of the Jewish revival in Kazimierz is Polish-Jewish reconciliation. Since Jewishness serves an important role in imagining an alternative Polish identity, it must maintain its status as a symbol, carrying meanings of inclusivity and difference that are key to Polish struggles today. This overlapping of Jewish matters with Polish national interests is evident when one examines the revival's current projects, such as those concerned with the

³⁷ Ruth E. Gruber, 'The Kraków Jewish Culture Festival', in *Focusing on Jewish Popular Culture and Its Afterlife*, ed. by Michael C. Steinlauf and Antony Polonsky, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 34 vols (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), xvi, 357-67 (p. 364).

³⁸ Lehrer, p. 16.

LGBTQIA+ community and women's rights. Thus, I have established that Jewishness as a representation of the rights of Polish minorities is a symbol of a more inclusive view of Polish national identity, and so it must remain a symbol to continue fulfilling its role. How did Jewishness gain such a strong symbolic meaning? What exactly are these liberal nation-building projects trying to achieve? And why is the fulfilment of these objectives striven for through the category of Jewishness? I will answer these questions in the following section, tracing the roots of Kazimierz's dynamics in the history of Polish national identity.

Jewishness and Polish National Identity

The dynamics in Kazimierz are representative of the dynamics in Polish society as a whole. Heritage activism is one projection of the desire for a more inclusive Poland, with the symbol of the Jew reflecting the wider aspirations of liberals to resist the homogenising narrative of the governing party. In many contexts, discussion about Jewishness is, in fact, a discussion about a preferred model of Polish identity. To be more specific, two opposing sides can be identified in this discussion, expressing a preference for either an ethnic or a civic conception of the nation.³⁹ This clash has long polarised Polish society, sparking major disagreements about the past, present, and future of the Polish nation. Only upon consideration of the whole context of Polish identity struggles, can one understand the dynamics in Kazimierz in their full complexity.

Ethnic-Civic Debate

Currently, the majority of the Polish population identifies as ethnically white and religiously Catholic.⁴⁰ These two characteristics — ethnicity and religion — are continually employed by the ruling Law and Justice party to define the category of Polishness, which includes its supporters and excludes any 'ideological deviance'.⁴¹ The conservative government is known for its discriminatory measures against various minorities who cannot be categorised as ethno-Catholic Poles, such as feminists, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQIA+ community. However great the degree of discrimination, it is justified according to the state-sponsored narrative precisely according to this notion of protecting the boundaries of Polish identity. In

³⁹ Geneviève Zubrzycki, 'The Classical Opposition Between Civic and Ethnic Models of Nationhood: Ideology, Empirical Reality and Social Scientific Analysis', *Polish Sociological Review*, 139 (2002) 275–95 (pp. 288–290).

⁴⁰ Geneviève Zubrzycki, 'Nationalism, "Philosemitism," and Symbolic Boundary-Making in Contemporary Poland', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 58 (2016) 66–98 (p. 70).

⁴¹ Zubrzycki, 'Nationalism, "Philosemitism"', p. 76.

other words, the government derives its legitimacy from a naturalisation of Poland's 'mono-culturalism' and portraying itself as protector of a centuries-long legacy, nurturing the social belief that ethno-Catholicism has always been the core marker of Polishness.⁴²

I will conceptualise this understanding of nationhood as 'ethnic' following a distinction between 'ethnic' and 'civic' types of nations, a distinction first formulated by Smith⁴³ and applied by Zubrzycki in the context Polish society. An ethnic understanding of the nation conceptualises it as a native community wherein belonging is based on shared characteristics that are inherited rather than acquired. The civic understanding conceptualises a nation as a democratic community of citizens wherein belonging is based on choice. Although the ethnic model of nationhood is dominant in present-day Poland, governmental attempts to naturalise it rely on false premises. The idea of a Polish nation was initially formed along civic lines, but only through recent historical events has this conception considerably narrowed.⁴⁴

Jewishness as a Counter-Narrative

Polishness as a national identity emerged over the past few centuries as a result of historical events and political processes.⁴⁵ Despite embodying an aura of timelessness, the current dominant ethno-religious definition of Polish nationality is a relatively recent invention. In fact, the proto-national idea of Polishness was initially formed along civic lines, with national identity defined in terms of political belonging as opposed to ethnicity and religious affiliation. This period, namely the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, was marked by high levels of ethnic diversity and relative religious tolerance, with the national category remaining inclusive of various minority groups. However, the occupation period, which extended from the late eighteenth century to the twentieth century, reoriented national identity along new, ethnic lines. This politically motivated narrowing of national boundaries promulgated the perception of the ethnic-Catholic Pole as the only legitimate Pole, a perception further naturalised during the postwar period by various political actors.

⁴² Zubrzycki, p. 73.

⁴³ See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁴⁴ Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 76.

⁴⁵ See Geneviève Zubrzycki, 'Chapter One: Genealogy of Polish Nationalism', in *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 34-76.

This ethnic conception of the nation became increasingly contested following Poland's transition to an independent state in 1989.⁴⁶ Upon joining the community of European liberal democracies, many Poles expressed their desire for a more civic understanding of nationhood, as existed in Western European countries. Proponents of this understanding were dissatisfied with the narrowness of the state-sponsored national category, aspiring to render it more inclusive of Poles pertaining to various minorities: religious, ethnic, sexual, and ideological. To oppose the naturalised image of a homogenous ethno-Catholic Poland, progressive Poles promoted a critical understanding of history by offering counter-narratives underlining Poland's historical diversity. One can identify this process when scrutinising narratives regarding the Polish-Jewish past, as Jews constituted the most prominent ethnic minority in Poland until their almost total erasure from the Polish landscape in the twentieth century. Due to the historical significance and physical absence of Jews, Jewishness became a major symbol in the dispute between nation-builders, representing Poland's multi-ethnic past which the opposing sides aimed to either emphasise or forget. Rather than negating Poland's historical ethnic diversity, liberals strove to emphasise it, encouraging interest in Jewish matters by initiating the revival of Jewish culture.

In this section, I contextualised the Jewish revival in wider debates about Polish national identity, demonstrating that heritage activism is but one attempt at promoting a civic model of nationhood opposing the dominant ethnic model. By emphasising the significance of the Commonwealth period and openly supporting discriminated minorities, the activists in Kazimierz enacted their desired civic version of Polishness. I will now return to an analysis of the neighbourhood to demonstrate how the symbolic Other can be used to re-imagine the nation in the present, and to analyse what possibilities and risks are involved in this process.

Risks and Possibilities of the Jewish Revival

I have established that the Jewish revival was initiated *by* Poles and, to a large extent, *for* Poles, and is very much focused on extending national boundaries in the present. This recognition rebuts the assumption that Kazimierz calls for a literal resurrection of Jewish life, or that its main function is to encourage a reconciliation between Poles and Jews. Instead, the revival reveals how activists assert their aspirations about the Polish future through the

⁴⁶ Geneviève Zubrzycki, 'Chapter Two: "We, the Polish Nation": Redefining the Nation in Post-Communist Poland', in *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 34-76.

theme of Jewishness, materialising difference in the neighbourhood to counter the homogenising view of Polishness. They use Kazimierz as tangible evidence in the ethnic-civic debate, giving concrete shape to their otherwise abstract ideas. Jewish-themed venues, with their nostalgic aesthetics, draw on a multi-ethnic past to enact civic Poland in the present, making difference visible and normalising it as Polish. The neighbourhood is a space where identities are negotiated in relation to what is framed as their opposite. The revival's priority is not merely Polish-Jewish dialogue, as Lehrer aims to demonstrate, but also its role in the Polish-Polish cultural war, as Zubrzycki sees it.

The Jew Must Remain the Other

Having addressed this understanding of the Polish-Polish war, I will now analyse the risks of involving Jewishness in this conflict, returning to the issue of why my Jewish friend felt objectified by the project whose aim was to celebrate and normalise difference. As the idea of the 'Ideal Indigenous Other' was constructed in response to the concept of the Jew as the enemy, the same dynamic lies at the core of the progressive approach; that is, the instrumentalisation of otherness. To serve its ideological function in progressive discourse, the Jew must remain the Other, with their difference articulated rather than denied.

This argument can be understood in reference to Kazimierz since the neighbourhood derives its recognition precisely from its uniqueness. Through the materialisation of difference, activists aim to inspire support towards perceived Otherness. To make an impact and provoke reflection, then, the neighbourhood must maintain its difference; therefore, 'de-Othering' the Jew does not lie in its interests. It is its contrast to what is normative and familiar that defines the quarter's transformative potential. In the Jewish revival, otherness is not mitigated but instrumentalised in a different way.

Jewish Absence

This observation has two implications, both of which challenge Lehrer's notion of 'conciliatory heritage'. Firstly, to cultivate the otherness of the Jew is a matter of control exerted by one group over another, 'because that Other, whether real or symbolic, remains malleable at the hands of those who control the category' and is expected to meet predefined expectations.⁴⁷ Kazimierz is not a utopian, power-free space, as Lehrer suggests when referring to anarchist theories; instead, it is the locus of a certain power dynamic, whereby

⁴⁷ Geneviève Zubrzycki, 'Nationalism, "Philosemitism," and Symbolic Boundary-Making in Contemporary Poland', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 58 (2016) 66–98 (p. 93).

Poles define Jewishness in a way which best suits their interests. It is almost as if Jews were welcomed as long as they fulfilled the role designated to them, and only as visitors, since their absence is convenient.

When addressing the association of Jewishness with Polish concerns, one must note that this process is enabled by a lack of Jews themselves. Jewish absence facilitates conservative nightmares and liberal dreams, with the Jewish body viewed 'as an empty container, filled with Polish aversions, fears, desires, and aspirations'.⁴⁸ In other words, the absent Jew becomes a symbol used by various actors to express their preferred version of Polishness. Activists in Kazimierz were not interested in the literal return of Jews to Poland; instead, they longed for a Poland where the co-habitation of different ethnic groups would be possible, projecting their aspirations onto the city landscape. With this in mind, the presence of Jewish visitors, recognised by Lehrer as central to the Jewish revival, is more of a by-product.

Despite its dialogue-oriented agenda, the Jewish revival creates divisions between Poles and Jews, although in an entirely different and more subtle way than the anti-Semites whom it aims to oppose. As a result, the power dynamic involved in the Jewish revival can become a barrier to cross-cultural understanding, as it leads to the reification of the Other on behalf of the Pole. This potential impact is entirely overlooked in Lehrer's praise of the conciliatory potential of the neighbourhood.

The Transformative Potential of Polish-Jewish Encounters

If efforts to create a truly inclusive, civic Poland are founded on the exclusive instrumentalisation of the Other, does it suggest imminent failure? The implications of this contradiction are not discussed by Zubrzycki, whose work excludes the subject of Polish-Jewish interactions altogether. Although I agree with the author's critique of the revival, her sociological analysis has an overly pessimistic tone, as its focus on the discursive level is divorced from real relations taking place on the ground. However, combining Zubrzycki's criticism with Lehrer's ethnographic material enables one to appreciate a wide range of positive opportunities that the revival nevertheless creates. I will discuss these opportunities by focusing on individual interactions with and within 'Jewish spaces.'

Firstly, individual engagement with well-preserved Jewish heritage allows for historical revisionism, as it highlights aspects of Polish-Jewish history neglected by official accounts. The confusion which occurs when Poles surround themselves with well-preserved Jewish

⁴⁸ Zubrzycki, p. 87.

heritage allows them to think more critically about the state-sponsored idea of the primordially homogeneous Poland, shedding light on its multicultural past. The revitalised sites of Kazimierz also allow visiting Jews to see that ‘Poland [...] existed in color’ and challenges their conception of the country primarily as the Holocaust site.⁴⁹ Both Poles and Jews can realise that their common past is not as black and white as it is presented to them and encounter each other in the midst of this confusion.

Polish-Jewish encounters are the primary focus of Lehrer’s ethnography. Although I disagree with the author since I argue that these encounters are more of a by-product of the Jewish revival than its primary aim, Lehrer nevertheless insightfully illustrates the significance of these interactions for both Jews and Poles. Due to the small number of Jews in Poland and antagonisms on both sides, very few Poles are personally familiar with a Jew, the latter conceived as ‘not a person, but a fragment of the collective imagination’.⁵⁰ Similarly, for Jews, visiting Poland is most often a one-time event involving visits to Holocaust sites and brief encounters with Polish people. However, ‘Jewish spaces’ with their various venues and initiatives allow visitors to not only interact with Jewishness and Polishness as such but also actively interact with one other. These encounters allow for reflections upon ‘how they looked at me looking at them’ as Lehrer’s informant describes, shedding light on the symbolism attached to both groups and allowing individuals to call these symbols into question as they establish personal connections.⁵¹ In other words, Polish-Jewish encounters enable both groups to rework their understandings of themselves and each other. Only when understood in this way can Kazimierz sites be said to serve the conciliatory function that Lehrer ascribes to them. This achievement cannot, however, be attributed to heritage work and the Jewish revival per se; instead, it results from the interpersonal encounters of individuals as they grow cautious of interpretive frameworks that assume the inherent difference of the Other.

⁴⁹ Lehrer, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Tych and Adamczyk-Grabowska, p. 1031.

⁵¹ Lehrer, p. 7.



Figure 8: The New Jewish Cemetery in its neglected state



Figure 9: The view from the cemetery on the neighbouring shopping centre



Figure 10: The cemetery wall made of Jewish gravestones

Conclusion

I will conclude this article with one final memory from the Festival: by the end of the project, my Israeli friend and I went for a walk to a nearby historically Jewish cemetery located on the outskirts of the Kazimierz neighbourhood. As soon as we entered, we were shocked by its miserable state which starkly contrasted the well-preserved Kazimierz sites; the grass was unkempt, the paths were barely traversable, and many gravestones were broken and lying loosely on the ground (see Figure 8). Furthermore, the visitors were constantly confronted with a view of the neighbouring shopping centre as there was no proper fencing encompassing the cemetery (see Figure 9). To my friend's despair, the sole wall was made out of Jewish gravestones (see Figure 10). The disparity between the glamour of Kazimierz and the neglect of the cemetery caused us to doubt the sincerity of the project in which we participated.

If the Jewish revival's priority was truly the celebration of Jewishness and preservation of Jewish memory, why did it not pay closer attention to less visited sites? It was precisely at

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that moment that I began to ponder the interests driving the Jewish revival in Kazimierz, which focused on Polishness as much as on Jewishness itself. The cemetery, located on the periphery of the revitalised quarter, seemed to lie beyond the interests of the Jewish revival, calling into question its dialogue-centred approach. Despite this incoherence, it was the revival that enabled my friend and I to meet and reflect upon Polish-Jewish relations. Thanks to the Festival and its inaugural international volunteering project, we could stand together on the cemetery grounds and mourn the past, reflect on the present, and hope for the future.

One should remain both critical of the approach of the Jewish revival and attentive to the various opportunities it creates. The Jewish revival in Poland is not, as Lehrer assumes, a utopian instance of transcending constraining national categories and meeting the Other 'in-between'. The neighbourhood of Kazimierz is not free from the weight of ideologies and structures of power. Due to the historical significance and physical absence of Jews, Jewishness became an important symbol in the debate between nation-builders, embodying Poland's historical ethnic diversity, which the opposing sides aim to either emphasise or forget. The revival aims to promote a civic understanding of the nation and uses the symbol of Jewishness to advance their goal. This is visible when scrutinising both the history of the revitalisation of Kazimierz and the structure of present initiatives that often align themselves with various minorities' interests despite diverging from strictly Jewish themes. The Jew serves as an 'Ideal Indigenous Other' who speaks of minority interests generally and is used to extend national boundaries and counter the homogenising narrative of the governing party.

Despite representing the Jew as the 'Ideal Indigenous Other', the Jewish revival creates space for interpersonal encounters which can enable growth, shifting focus from the symbolic value of the Other to their inherent humanness, therefore of paramount importance to the advancement of Polish-Jewish dialogue. Although the revitalisation of Kazimierz uses the symbol of Jewishness in its reconceptualisation of present-day Poland, it still gives shape to 'Jewish spaces' that facilitate growth through conversation with others. Kazimierz can be understood not only as 'difficult heritage', which disrupts the dominant narratives of identity and history, but also as 'anti-heritage', which emphasises the unexpected impact of these disruptions. According to Macdonald, 'anti-heritage [...] recognise[s] ongoing change and developments, rather than reaching closure' and emphasises 'continual unsettlement'.⁵² In other words, Kazimierz's facilitation of Polish-Jewish encounters inspires interpersonal connections that unsettle narratives of the assumed 'otherness' of the Other. Kazimierz has the potential to mitigate the symbolism attributed to the Other by both conservative and

⁵² Macdonald, p. 192.

progressive actors, thus critiquing both approaches. As anti-heritage, Kazimierz is a place of unexpected cultural possibilities; it is an intersection of longings and concerns that connect individuals despite notions of assumed difference.

In this article, I put Lehrer and Zubrzycki in dialogue and closely analysed the phenomenon of the Jewish revival in Poland — its roots, risks, and potentials. I argued that the Jewish revival is not about transcending the symbolism of the Other but working precisely with this symbolism to redefine Polishness in creative ways. National boundaries do not have to be defined *against* the Other, but they can also be defined *through* the Other, with its difference emphasised to enact a more inclusive version of the nation. Nationhood is an ongoing, complex discourse; it is an intersection of ideas, hopes, and desires, which are often in conflict with each other. It is at the level of these intersections that one should look for the nation.

Analysing heritage work can greatly advance scholarly understanding of nationhood as a contested category, since places such as Kazimierz are the enactments of identity aspirations. These spaces shed light on individuals' identity claims, revealing the complexity of interactions with and within interpretive frameworks, and the framework of Polish-Jewish relations is such an example. I also recognise that my work carries significant limitations since it is not grounded in thorough empirical research, thus lacks a broader perspective that such research would allow. I relied only on my own experience, taking this autoethnographic opportunity to explore my own encounter with the project.

Nevertheless, I believe that my article can be of great value to further research on the future of Polish-Jewish dialogue, as it offers a voice from the young generation critical of existing approaches and yearning for a new one to 'de-Other' the Jew. It is concerning that progressive approaches magnify the deep divisions within Polish society, since these approaches also rely on exclusionary symbolic frameworks. There is, however, potential for change, the potential of practice in transcending ideologies. I find hope in the Polish-Jewish bonds that I both witnessed and developed in Kazimierz, and I am grateful to the revival for making them possible. For the first time on this scale, Polish and Jewish youth could finally meet and confront their understandings of one other, not as enemies or allies, but as roommates, friends, and even lovers.

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