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SILENT TRACES AND DESERTED PLACES: MATERIALITY AND SILENCE ON POLAND'S EASTERN BORDER

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This article explores how silence is held and transmitted through the materiality of deserted and abandoned places along the Polish frontier; and the generative role that silencing plays in local practices of tolerance. The article discusses two specific sites of silence in a town on Poland's eastern border. Both sites were abandoned or destroyed at the same time, and are part of a larger landscape of religious and ethnic conflict in the area. This history of conflict is managed through small everyday acts of forgetting, minimising and silencing. Yet, the two sites at the centre of this article demonstrate that silencing is an incomplete process. The fragmented materiality of the two places undercuts local silences, actively invoking experiences and memories of the Holocaust. The objects missing and present in these haunted places are too inconsequential to be considered ruins – one site is notable only because it is an empty field. Yet these sites and objects act as powerful silent traces. Traces, as Napolitano (2015) has observed, are knots of history with an ambiguous auratic presence, located between memory and forgetting, repression and amplification. Traces conjure that which we can and that which we cannot say. The deserted places of the town draw attention to the silences that conviviality is built upon. This article considers how paying close attention to the specific silences concerning 'unthinkable' histories can reveal the power relations embedded in the process of history making and community building not just nationally, but also at the local level (Trouillot 1995).

KEYWORDS: Poland, silence, neighbourliness, trace, the Holocaust, absences

It is tempting to discuss silence only in terms of the discourse of nation building: what stories get told about the nation, who gets to tell those stories, what histories and memories are excluded from the official historical record and what kind of nations do these exclusions and inclusions create? Yet silencing does not just create gaps in the authorised historical narrative of a nation. Silencing is also generative: it shapes the physical and material world just as it shapes the discursive one, and is an element of the practices that construct cohesive local communities. In this article, I will address silencing at the local scale, demonstrating how the materiality of deserted and abandoned landscapes is generated by, maintains and transmits silence. In particular, this article will pay attention to the way in which locally silenced historical events are not

forgotten, but rather suspended in the landscape. I will discuss two specific sites of discomfort in Biała[1], a town on the north-eastern border of Poland. They are both sites in which material presence and absence engage silenced historical moments of religious and ethnic conflict. The importance of exploring the concept of silenced histories at a local level is that it reveals the complicated way in which silencing works. Biała is historically religiously, ethnically and linguistically pluralistic. Locally, this pluralism is managed through small everyday acts of silencing. In this article, I demonstrate that the silencing of stories and memories of conflict and ethnic cleansing does not equate to their forgetting, nor has it led to the destruction of the material residues of these histories. Rather, it has created a landscape of fragments and traces. Through an analysis of what silence is actually doing on the local scale, this article highlights some of the reasons why silencing cannot act effectively as a framework for nation building.

This article looks at two interrelated examples of the materiality of silence. I focus on two empty places in Biała, examining how local people interact with, talk about and avoid these sites. These two sites are part of a larger landscape of silence within the town. The events that shaped these empty sites have neither been forgotten, nor are they in the process of being forgotten; rather the memory of these events is suspended in the sites' fragmented materiality. As Napolitano (2015, 58; 60) has observed, traces are knots of history with an ambiguous auratic presence, located between memory and forgetting, repression and amplification. Traces conjure that which we can and that which we cannot say in the same moment. The traces in these deserted places are too inconsequential to be considered ruins: one site is notable only because it is an empty field, the other because it is a gravel filled garden with a large out of place gate. Yet, these sites and objects act as powerful traces, which keep silences in the collective memory of the town from becoming total: they suspend the local memory and representation of the Holocaust in these particular locations. The Holocaust, and the subsequent policies of silence created by the memory politics of the socialist government, have shaped the lives of Biała's residents in drastic ways. The central argument of this article is that the silent places in Biała are not the result of an attempting to deny, ignore or forget history. Instead, they are places where the politics of ambiguity is embraced.

In many ways, a politics of ambiguity seems like a safe approach when dealing with divisive periods of intense loss and conflict: a way to seal these periods off from contemporary life without completely disregarding them. Yet the problem with a politics of ambiguity is that it is also a politics of spectres (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2013). So long as memories of ethnic conflict and genocide remain suspended in the material landscape of the town, they haunt. Failing to address these critical moments in local history, leaving them suspended in the town's landscape, means that they can always

1 At the request of the people I interviewed, consulted and stayed with, I have anonymised the name of the town.

return unbidden. The ghost or the spectre is frightening because it waits, and can return unexpectedly, forcing us to confront and answer questions from the long-buried past without warning (Derrida 1994). The deserted places in Biała draw attention to the silences that local practices of conviviality are built upon and function as markers of those who are left out of history. Trouillot has shown that paying close attention to specific silences concerning "unthinkable" histories can reveal the power relations embedded in the process of history-making both locally and nationally (1995). To this I would add that, in the case of north-eastern Poland, exploring the materiality of silences reveals the inadequacy of silencing as a framework for developing local identity.

This article will start by providing some context for the argument, and then move on to discuss the two deserted places indicated in the title. This second section will also introduce an analysis of material traces in the landscape of the town. The third section will engage with ongoing discussions about memory and the Holocaust in eastern Poland. The article will conclude by returning to the idea that connects this article to the rest of this special issue: it performs an analysis of the inadequacy of silencing as a framework for nation building, developed by reflecting on what silence is actually doing in the local area.

CONTEXT

Biała is a small town at the centre of a rambling municipality. During the period of my fieldwork, 2011-2012, it had approximately 3800 residents, many of whom were scattered around the countryside. Only around 1800 people lived in the town, and over half were older than sixty-five or younger than eighteen years of age. The centre of Biała was contained within three main roads and surrounded by cornfields to the west, forests to the south and north, and the River Bug and the border with Belarus to the east. In 2011, the local official unemployment rate was almost 3% above the provincial average, but Biała remained one of the more economically well-off towns in the province (Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2015). The municipality was renowned throughout the east of the country as a site of Mariological significance. While the majority of the town's population were Roman Catholic, during my fieldwork Biała was also home to a sizable Eastern Orthodox Christian minority. Alongside the large Roman Catholic church in the centre of town, there was also a good sized Eastern Orthodox Christian church. Within the municipality and at its edges were a number of Ukrainian Catholic sites, as well as the only remaining Neo-Unite parish in Poland. There were also several sites that evoked the Jewish and Tatar heritage of this area of Poland. The area had many sites that officially and unofficially attested to its long and complex history of ethnic, religious, national and linguistic diversity. There is not enough space to go deeply into the history of the area within this article, and so I focus

on one key historical conflict.[2] However, it is important to note that the demographics of the town are a direct result of the area's history. While it is now located in Poland's eastern borderlands, Biała has not always been under the control of the Polish state. Over centuries, different political and national polities have ruled, controlled and shaped the area surrounding the town. This in turn has led to different ethnic and religious groups ascending and declining in power at different points in history. The diversity of the local population speaks directly to the town's complex history.

During the year I lived in the town, the population was predominately Roman Catholic and Polish speaking; there was also a small and vocal Eastern Orthodox Christian minority, and a handful of Protestant and Ukrainian Catholic families. Many in the town had Belarusian family and heritage, and in private people occasionally spoke Ukrainian, although very few people claimed to have any connection to Ukraine. The majority of land, shops and businesses in the area were owned by the majority Roman Catholic population, and most local politicians were Roman Catholic. The Roman Catholic church was one of the largest landowners and provided a number of jobs, which increased seasonally.

Despite the diversity of the local population and the long histories of conflict over this diversity, people in Biała constantly pointed out the conviviality between residents to me and other visitors. During my time in the town, I was fortunate to work with both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian locals. In my interviews with the town's majority and minority populations, conviviality and cohabitation were frequently discussed hand in hand. Conviviality was commonly expressed through the concept of *dobrosąsiedztwo,* an apparently non-standard local expression for "neighbourliness". This neighbourliness was a set of practices, obligations and habits that recognised, minimised and organised difference within the pluralistic population of the town. One's neighbours were primarily defined as the people likely to gather around your kitchen table. It was not just proximity but praxis that created a shared local life, and this in turn generated neighbourly ties across religion and ethnicity. The practice of neighbourliness was not limited to interactions between people: individual actions – such as leaving your front door open – were also an important element of the practice. Unlike the relationships that formed through sharing gossip beside the church, neighbourliness had no connection to religious affiliation. The kitchen table, the centre of neighbourly relations, was a place where religious difference was minimised, and instead the shared experience of life in a small border town was emphasised. When someone spoke of their neighbour, this was not a simple indication of spatial distance: they could mean someone next door or equally someone living at the other end of

2 I have addressed this history elsewhere, see Joyce 2017 & 2019. Other authors including Brown 2004, Zarycki 2011 & 2014, Straczuk 2013, Prusin 2010 and Hann 1996 have discussed the complicated history of this region in detail.

town. Rather the term contained a suggestion of relational distance: your neighbours were "like family" without being kin, they were friends in whose everyday lives and personal histories you were entangled. Yet there was a sharp edge to this definition of neighbourliness, as I have discussed elsewhere (Joyce 2017). Many neighbours came from different religious or ethnic backgrounds, and local discussions of neighbourliness always started from this position: that difference was present, but portrayed as unimportant in the practice of neighbourliness. Thus, neighbourliness was a practice that aimed to manage difference by constantly drawing attention to difference.

In many ways, the concept of neighbourliness expressed and practiced in Biała resonates with the work of Pasieka (2015), Lehmann (2009) and Buzalka (2007) on the south-eastern Polish border and with that of Głowacka-Grajper on the history of the Kresy (2015).[3] Pasieka's work untangles the practices and discourses that underlie religious and ethnic plurality on the borders of Poland. She demonstrates that in the practice of neighbourliness, religious and ethnic boundaries are simultaneously blurred and bright (Pasieka 2015, 153). As a result, neighbourly practices are also boundary making practices. Lehmann is likewise interested in a contradiction that neighbourly behaviour elucidates. Reflecting on the writings of British anthropologist Max Gluckman, she unpicks how the "weak ties" of neighbourliness bisect the strong ties of kinship, religion and ethnicity as "cross-cutting cleavages". In this way, weak ties "establish a bridge between various densely-knit networks" which functions as a key mechanism for managing ethnic and religious conflict in a local area (ibid, 139–140). Lehmann's argument connects nicely with Buzalka's theory of "ordinary tolerance" (2007, 157), whereby people reject extreme nationalism in favour of traditional agrarian practices of cooperation, local trading activities and neighbourly relationships of trust (ibid).

Buzalka points out that ordinary tolerance is often understood as a part of a broader celebration of diversity which invigorates politics in southeast Poland (2007). Working with biographies of residents from the same area, uncovered in the Oral History Archive in Warsaw, Głowacka-Grajper's work demonstrates the longevity of neighbourliness as an organising principle of social life (2015). Scattered throughout these life stories are references to the importance of neighbourliness, and an explicit connection between neighbourliness and place-making/belonging. As Głowacka-Grajper notes, "The words 'I am from here' fixed all national matters" (2015, 171). Yet, as was also the case in Biała, the constant recourse to neighbourliness also meant constantly having to admit to your ethno-religious identity – before you could be reassured that it did not matter. The question of who does this reassuring is very important and tells us something about the power dynamics in the area. While everyone minimises difference when discussing neighbourliness, when it comes to discussion of ethno-religious difference outside of discussions of neighbourliness, only the Roman Catholic members

3 The Kresy refers broadly to the eastern borders of Poland and is a complex and evocative term.

of the community continued to insist that these differences are irrelevant. When the discussion moved beyond the idea of neighbourliness, most of the Eastern Orthodox Christians, Protestants and Ukrainian Catholics I interviewed were quick to explain how their religious denominations excluded them from power.

While everyone benefited from the practice of neighbourliness, it is not wrong to suggest that it also insulated the most powerful members of the town from the need to address ongoing conflicts around ethno-religious difference. Like kin, the neighbourly relationship survived across generations. Even in situations where historical upheaval had caused ruptures, current practices of neighbourliness acknowledged division, while attempting to surmount it. Your neighbours were not just those who *lived close* to you, but also those who *lived with* you (Henig 2012, 15) even as they *lived differently* to you. Managing the ambiguity of the borderlands' position in wider understandings of the nation is part of the work of everyday life. In Biała, the residents had found that neighbourliness – as a prevailing local mode of existence – allowed them to do this.

DESERTED PLACES

Underneath this focus on cohesion, conviviality and neighbourliness, Biała seemed to be full of abandoned places, missing buildings and strange public objects people did not talk about. So much of what people said, either in interviews or in everyday conversations, referred obliquely to history or local memory that many conversations and interviews were like half-finished puzzles. I dedicated much of the early part of my research to discovering the "true" stories about the town. Working out what historical information I needed in order to contextualise what I was hearing required: getting to know the local gossip, identifying the key events of local life according to different religious and ethnic communities, exploring local archives and reading copious books on the history of the region. Yet, even as I became familiar with the history of Biała and the lives of the people with whom I worked, still the gaps remained. I began to realise that there were some events in local memory that people could not, or would not, tell me about (Joyce 2019). About halfway through my year in Biała, I began to understand the hesitation and contradiction in what people said and how they acted. In my effort to get at the "true" stories of Biała, I had tried to bring together traces and fragments to fill in the silences that emerged in the stories I was being told. I had approached these silences as problems to be resolved. But the silences, and respecting these silences, were essential elements of the stories. By trying to make fragments and traces act as evidence I had misunderstood their inherently multifaceted quality. A trace does not provide evidence for a single story or memory of the past; it cannot be made to speak in a single voice. Instead, the trace is manifold: it can invoke many different histories and might not always be able to "speak" (Napolitano 2015). In this way, the

material traces of conflict in Biała were frequently tasked with holding or suspending memories, rather than invoking or speaking them.

These fragments of conflict were not just present in the incomplete stories that people told. Living in the town also drew me to notice the absences and traces in the landscape. Traces and silences are not just found in the accounts that the anthropologist records: often the trace is a gap in the material world where we know something should be, or a conspicuous refusal to engage with a powerful material presence. It is not just that there are silences in the town's records, or historical events that people do not talk about. There are spaces in the landscape where the presence or absence of specific objects speak to the fact that something is missing, and people do not speak about these absences. This is part of the reason it is so difficult to distinguish between absences and silence, or the practices of silencing. Absences and traces only become apparent when there are silences surrounding them. Silence is a necessary medium for the emergence of traces in the material world.

Biała was full of places, monuments and buildings that still existed for people, even as their physical remains did not. Then there were the buildings and objects which people ignored: the places people would not walk to or engage with. There was no clear way to draw all these objects, ideas and memories together to create a linear narrative of conflict in the town's history. This was partially because, alongside the gaps in many of the stories I heard, events I observed or places I interacted with, certain phrases or objects seemed to contain traces of other stories and events. Studying the history of Biała since has been filled with contradictions and vacuums, with a single piece of information often being used in multiple and different ways. I have come to see that my task as an anthropologist is not to order these fragments and fill in the gaps. Rather, my task is to find a method of analysis that includes the traces and silences that are an essential part of understanding how the people of Biała live with conflicting historical narratives and different memories of the past.

Traces and fragments are essential – but complicated – parts of studying the imbrication of history and social life, and the ways in which communal memories relate to the historical record (Connerton 1989). Speaking about history making, Michel-Rolph Trouillot has demonstrated the power of fragments and traces to upset hegemonic narratives and practices (1995). Silences are not accidental. They are the result of individual historical processes that seek to legitimise the powerful by making their stories and histories seem inevitable and universal. Silence for Trouillot is an "active and transitive process" that involves stopping a story or fact before it is shared, archived or uncovered in order to offer a single interpretation of historical facts (1995, 28; 48). In this way, the memories and events that are silences in local practices and discourses echo through the state authorised historical record. Paying attention to when and how silences are made is important as it leads us to recognise that not all silences operate in the same way. Some silences are deeply meaningful and generative, while others

are almost incidental. Singular events or places can contain multiple layers of silences, overlapping in different ways. However, even these silences are not total: silencing leaves traces. The task of analysis then is to look to the traces in history and draw them into the conversation. But Trouillot cautions against the idea of developing a singular "alternative history" narrative from these traces and silences (1995, 28; 58–59). This was the key challenge I faced when learning to write about traces and silences. As I will demonstrate in this section, discovering traces and stories in the landscape of the town was not challenging. The challenge came when deciding how to present and analyse these traces. Primarily, this involved resisting the pull to use these traces as evidence: avoiding the temptation to try to fill in some of the spaces in conversations about ethnic cleansing and forced relocation with the material fragments of these histories to be found in the town. These traces could not provide an alternative way of addressing historical evasions, because these traces were integral to the practice of evasion still at the centre of how difference is managed in the area. Beyond this, discovering traces of specific silences around one particular event in the town's history in one location revealed that those same silences existed simultaneously in other spaces, and in local concepts and practices relating to that event.

To explain more clearly what I mean by this I want to move to ethnographically discuss the relationship between silence and trace in two locations in Biała. The first location is a big, gravel filled garden enclosed by a rickety wire fence and a large iron gate. The garden was on the right-hand side of a large, square, concrete family home on one of the main roads in the town. The size of the garden, the fact it was covered in gravel and its position in relation to the house were all unusual for the area, where most gardens surround the home and are filled with vegetables, plants and flowers. I had noticed the garden and its mismatched gate and fence at the beginning of my fieldwork. But one evening, just over halfway into my time in the town, a local amateur historian, Henryk, pointed it out to me again. We were at the end of the road when he discretely gestured to the big double gate made of wrought iron painted black. He drew my attention to the centre of the gate where – worked in iron – were the numbers one, nine, four, one: 1941. "That's an important date," Henryk told me with an air of significance. Over the month prior to showing me the gate, Henryk had, unprompted, shown me a number of sites which he told me related to the town's Jewish history. This was the context for his pointed statement about the number on the gate. In this way, without mentioning the Holocaust, Henryk drew a clear line from the out of place iron gate to a period in which all traces of the town's Jewish population had supposedly been wiped out. This way of speaking about the Holocaust was a good example of how silence was at the centre of many conversations about the event. When pointing out the gate, Henryk never mentioned the extermination of the Jewish population of the town, yet it was the unspoken heart of his statement about the importance of 1941 as a date.

A couple of weeks before showing me the gate, Henryk had brought me to the other space I discuss in this article: an empty field covered in apple trees. This, he had insisted, was all that remained of the town's Jewish graveyard. There was no trace of gravestones, brick walls, plaques or anything that would indicate that the site was anything other than what it appeared: an abandoned field. After visiting the apple orchard, I spoke a lot with Henryk and many of the other people I knew in town about the possibility of it being a Jewish cemetery. As I have discussed elsewhere (Joyce 2019), I could find no consensus. What was obvious was that in a town in which apples were treated as common property, none of the trees in this field were ever harvested. The apples fell to the ground and were left to rot. While the older men and women I interviewed could speak at length and in detail about land ownership (who owned what, who they rented or had sold it to, which son or daughter felt slighted, whose' great grandfather had once been evicted from where, etc., etc.), when it came to the abandoned apple tree field, no one seemed to know anything about either its current or past owners. After a couple of weeks, I realised I would never discover anything definite about this abandoned site – which Henryk told me was all the proof I needed to know he was right.

While Henryk and I spoke regularly about the former cemetery during the rest of my time in Biała, he never again expanded on the significance of the gate. It was Henryk's wife Polina who eventually explained to me that it was "widely known" in the town that the iron gate stood on the site of what was once the town's synagogue. This supposed consensus was based on two facts: firstly, that the synagogue had been destroyed in 1941, and secondly, that the family who were now owners had not owned the land prior to 1941. Yet these facts seemed impossible to prove. In 1941, the occupying Nazis removed the Jewish families of Biała from their homes and placed them in an open ghetto in the centre of the town (Spector and Wigoder, 2001). After this point, the dates of various key events become less certain. At some point between 1941 and 1942 the synagogue was demolished: there are no records of the event, simply the synagogue is mentioned in descriptions of the town from before 1941 and not mentioned again after 1942. During this same period, the Jewish residents of Biała were removed from the ghetto and executed (ibid). Beyond the bare outline of this story, there are few well-established facts to build on. While you can access a number of Yizkor books written about the town's Jewish population, few of these have access to accurate information, much of which was destroyed after 1945, and sometimes they directly contradict one another.[4] According to some local sources and those accessed

4 Yizkor (memory) books are remembrance texts created by descendants of Poland's Jewish population. They are varied in their form and content, but aim to act as records of the daily lives of Polish Jews prior to the Holocaust and list the names of all those eliminated during the Holocaust. A Yizkor book will focus on a specific town and use all available databases and archives to reconstruct the Jewish

via JewishGen, the Jewish population of Biała was sent to a concentration camp in 1941 or 1942; according to others, they were led to a forest and executed on mass in either 1942 or 1943. Even the site on which the synagogue stood is not documented in any of the records or maps I could access. While the date on the iron gate indicates that it was erected in the same year that the synagogue was likely destroyed, thus leaving its land available for use, there is no clear evidence that this garden was once the site of a Jewish synagogue. All of the local stories I heard about the gate, or the synagogue, had this silence at the heart of them. That there had been a synagogue was certain; but its destruction and location were only evident as traces. This was the context for Polina's knowledge of the iron gate. She framed her knowledge by informing me that the family who own the land were deeply annoyed by the local gossip about it. She believed that they were anxious that if too many people spoke about the old synagogue, they might start to wonder how the family had come to own the land. "Why not destroy the gate?" I asked, and she shrugged, indicating that she didn't know, before warning me against trying to ask the family behind it the same question. In the end, she did not need to warn me: the family behind the gate never responded to my requests to interview them.

The iron gate is an ambiguous trace. It provokes a story of the past that is built on a number of small silences. The story of the synagogue is uncertain, because no one spoke about its destruction in the years following the war, and no one made an official record of its existence. On the one hand, the gate marks a site where the past has been obliterated, nothing of the synagogue remains. Yet, after this wholescale destruction, someone still chose to weld the potential date of the synagogue's destruction into the new gate, forever highlighting this act of destruction. This story only works if you accept, without evidence beyond local hearsay, that the garden was once the site of the synagogue. Perhaps the gate has no connection to the Holocaust other than an unfortunate date of origin. Yet, since 1941, the families that have owned the land that the gate stands on have continued to maintain and paint it. It has remained in place throughout periods of intense iron shortages, which led to local people removing iron from graves in desperation (Joyce 2017). The family who owns the gate have ensured that it persists, even as they demand that no one discusses it.

history of that town. Most Yizkor books can be accessed online via JewishGen (run by The Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York).

SILENCE AND MEMORY

The absence that is engendered by the iron gate relies on a silence that is at the heart of all the stories that continue to circulate about the site. The silence that surrounds the abandoned apple tree field is of a different kind, and so the absence is rendered differently. While most people in the town will gossip about the iron gate, no one ever really talked about the apple tree field. As mentioned earlier, the field had first come to my attention as it was the only site in town where people did not pick apples, instead leaving them to fall from the trees and rot (Joyce 2019). Even after I was told that this was potentially the site of the Jewish graveyard by Henryk, no one else I spoke to could or would tell me anything about the site. Yet the practice of avoiding eating anything that grew on this land indicated that in some way it was understood as dangerous. It also potentially indicates that people realised that this was a graveyard: as in most of Poland, in this area it was considered unacceptable to remove anything from a graveyard.[5]

There were few parts of history that were not endlessly discussed and debated in Biała. Indeed, the history of the Holocaust was perhaps the only part of the recent past that remained unspoken, both in everyday conversations and in the majority of the interviews I made.[6] Yet by a series of inferences young people learned to make a connection between the absences in space and the silences in the local historical record. Reflecting on their 25-year study of the transmission of memories of Jewish history in Poland, Nowak, Kapralski and Niedźwiedzki note that this transmission seems to have largely stopped for the young people across Galicia with whom they worked from 2013 to 2017 (2018). Jewish history is not a daily encounter for them. It has no appeal, given that navigating Poland's current economic and social reality "demands a temporal orientation on the present or the future" (ibid, 155). The authors further note that this disinterest in Jewish history extends to how young people discuss the landscape of their towns (ibid, 194). In Biała, one encounters a similarly disinterested attitude on the part of young people toward discussions of Jewish history. Yet, while young people may not speak about local Jewish history as present in the local area, they still engage with the landscape of the town in ways that indicate their knowledge of it. As Kapralski noted, even in those places where traces of the Jewish past remain, they are framed by the concerns of non-Jewish Poles (2001). This leads to a situation where even openly Jewish sites of memory may be communicating a history that focuses on the point of view of the dominant Polish society (ibid). Yet Kapralski complicates his own claim by reminding the reader that traces of the past are always the result of ongoing

5 Thank you to one of the article reviewers for suggesting this connection.

6 In a small number of interviews, I asked directly about the Holocaust, but in the majority I did not. In interviews I conducted relating to the town's history, it was striking that people never bought up the Holocaust unprompted.

negotiations of power relations. There is not necessarily a consensus among different Polish groups about how to handle the material traces of the Holocaust. Therefore, it is impossible to shape these traces of the Jewish past completely in accordance with the majority's intentions (Kapralski 2001). This final idea helps explain why material and immaterial traces of the Jewish past in Biała are sources of ongoing tension and discord.

The Holocaust was a critical event. In a town filled with historical ruptures, it broke apart what came before it, obliterating a whole segment of the region's population in a way no other act of ethnic or religious violence had done. It also demonstrated an emptiness at the centre of the practice of neighbourliness. Das has argued that critical events "institute a new modality of historical action which was not inscribed in the inventory of that situation" (Das 1995, 5). To some extent, this happened in Biała: new modes of action did emerge which redefined traditional ways of being. At the same time, the post-war communist government followed the Soviet approach to memorialising World War II, instead of developing a specifically Polish approach to framing the experience of the war and the Holocaust. The Soviet approach explicitly avoided specific commemorations of Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Instead, its memorialisation presented a version of the Holocaust that resounded with Soviet ideology, in which victims were remembered as loyal Soviet citizens or innocent victims of fascism (Dobroszycki and Gurock 1994). Alongside this, the immediate post-war years involved the mass relocation of those deemed ethnically Ukrainian (Hann 1996), and a modernisation project which "took place 'over the dead bodies' of the Jews" (Nowak et al. 2018, 115). Throughout this post-war period, residents in Biała had to learn new ways to move through and engage with their landscape, absorb new ways to relate to the past and confront difficult insights into one of their core mechanisms for managing local conflict.[7]

The Holocaust introduced poisonous knowledge about the power of neighbourliness into the social life of Biała. Das first introduced the idea of poisonous knowledge in the book *Social Suffering* (1997), before expanding upon it in later work in which she explored the aftereffects of the communal violence enacted against Punjabi families in Pakistan after the partition of 1947 (2000; 2006). To do so, she focused on the everyday actions of families, rather than attempting to directly elicit stories of violent acts. In these everyday stories, violent events continued "attaching themselves as if with invisible tentacles to everyday life" long after the families had left Pakistan (Das 2006, 1). These events created doubt about the everyday social world: they introduced the poisonous knowledge that even the most taken-for-granted conventions of social life can dissolve into situations of extreme violence. The very rules of emotional and social connectedness are then replaced by an unknown void (Das 2000). Neighbourliness

7 I have spoken elsewhere about how the language of the Holocaust found its way into the framing of subsequent acts of ethnic conflict and forced relocation (Joyce 2017, 2019).

is the central mechanism for managing and organising difference in Biała, and plays a similar role across the pluralistic border regions of Poland (Straczuk 2012 & 2013). It is the praxis that prevents conflicts between local ethnic and religious groups, even as such conflicts are stoked on a national or international level. Yet the Holocaust reveals that it is a mechanism that has failed before, and failed disastrously. It also demonstrates that beyond the failure of neighbourliness is the limit of neighbourliness. As noted at the beginning of this article, neighbourliness is at the centre of practises of ordinary tolerance. The assumptions of neighbourliness are that communities function better when conviviality is emphasised over conflict; and that keeping communities together relies on avoiding, minimising or otherwise managing conflict.

In Biała, the silence surrounding the Holocaust reflects the reality that the annihilation of the Jewish population revealed that neighbourliness is not always an effective or necessary practice. This is the poisonous knowledge that the material traces of the holocaust force people to live with. During World War II, nearly one third of Biała's population disappeared overnight, and the physical landscape of the town was similarly rapidly reconstituted. Yet the town survived. It survived, shaped materially by the silences created by the loss of the Jewish population. These silences also continue to frame the current political, economic, social and cultural life of the town. They do not need to be remembered or forgotten; these silences are the structure that contemporary life is built on.

CONCLUSION

This article started with two related ethnographic questions: if Jewish history has been silenced in the town through the destruction of specific material space and interrupted transmissions of memory, then why do children still refuse to eat the apples that grow in the razed graveyard; and why do the family behind the iron gate not destroy it? I have previously argued that the silence and absences that mark the story of the Holocaust and other moments of ethnic cleansing in Biała do not indicate that these periods of history are being forgotten. Rather, they point to the impossibility of containing and inoculating against traumatic events without directly engaging them (Joyce 2019). This argument is similar to that made by Tokarska-Bakir, who has argued that Polish memories of the Holocaust are supressed and tabooed as a defence mechanism: a mechanism that seeks to manage the trauma of having witnessed and in some instances participated in the fate of the Jewish people of Poland (Tokarska-Bakir 2004). But as Nowak, Kapralski and Niedźwiedzki convincingly demonstrate, this model underestimates the power of the present by "search[ing] for the factors that determine social memory outside the present: in the traumatising events of the past" (2018, 221). For these authors, the silencing of memories of the Jewish past in Poland is primarily the outcome of historical memorialisation practices. During the

communist period, the Polish state failed to develop a uniquely Polish discourse on the Holocaust. In the years that followed communism, efforts to rebuild the Polish state operationalised specific cultural and religious ideas in the new mythology of the state. As a result, up until the 1990s any attempts to integrate social memories of Jewish history into the narrative of the Polish nation were set aside (ibid). While this led to an interruption of the transmission of stories, memories and histories of Polish Jewish culture, in many places small material traces of Jewish life remained.

While people in Biała did not want to speak about the destruction of the cemetery or the synagogue, they also did not seem to want to conceal it. No one I spoke to directly wanted to excavate the cemetery or turn it into an official memorial; but neither did they want to hide the site and thus prevent future excavations. Instead, the majority of people in the town continued to carefully elide the place and the memory.[8] Only the practice of avoiding the apples from the abandoned field continued through the generations and carried with it fuzzy post-memories of the Shoah (Joyce 2019). The iron gate was a similarly ambiguous place of silence. It was the lynchpin for any number of stories of World War II. The materiality of the date 1941 welded into the gate opened up an array of narrative positions. But this openness, alongside the uncertainty pertaining to dates surrounding the obliteration of the town's Jewish population, also prevented it from clearly providing evidence for any particular story. Silence, like memory then, is not a constant; rather, it is a relational process, shaped by how people engage material objects and bio-physical spaces in discourse and practice. As the generation that remembers Jewish life in Poland dies without transmitting their memories to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, will these silent spaces tend toward entropy? With only general history, stereotypes and popular media representations of Polish Jewishness to frame these material traces of the Holocaust, will these silenced spaces one day be rendered functionally empty, unable to conjure any real memories?

This article demonstrates that the power of these silent places is not that they contain memories that can be made to speak for the lost Jewish populations. Silence does not need to be operationalized in order to be powerful. The material traces of Jewish history at both of these sites bring together complicated and contradictory accounts of the Holocaust and its reality in this area. The silence that surrounds material traces of Jewish history reveals how powerfully they undermine local practices of community building. These local practices of conviviality insist on a centrality and efficacy of neighbourliness, which these sites undercut. The silence that haunts these abandoned places is the poisonous knowledge that cohesion is not a necessary element of community building: that neighbourliness is not egalitarian, it is shaped by the same

8 A small group of people in the town, mainly Eastern Orthodox Christians, did (like Henryk) want to talk about some aspects of the town's Jewish history. But even this group spoke sparingly about this, unless prompted to during interviews.

local power dynamics as prevail in the rest of the town's affairs. In order to be a good neighbour, you do not need to tolerate difference, you simply need to minimise its importance. The silence at the centre of these sites does not need to be spoken or framed by social memory to be efficacious. These sites remain silent, because it is impossible to incorporate them into the day-to-day social life of Biała without challenging the key narratives which underpin this social world. Silence here is also a generative force. Neighbourliness underpins the conviviality necessary to avoid conflict in the town, but it is an imperfect model of tolerance: one that is sustained through local practices of silence and silencing.

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