

The second life of Jewish belongings–Jewish personal objects and their afterlives in the Polish and Belarusian post-Holocaust shtetls

Magdalena Waligórska & Ina Sorkina

To cite this article: Magdalena Waligórska & Ina Sorkina (2022): The second life of Jewish belongings–Jewish personal objects and their afterlives in the Polish and Belarusian post-Holocaust shtetls, *Holocaust Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/17504902.2022.2047292](https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2022.2047292)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2022.2047292>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Mar 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE



The second life of Jewish belongings–Jewish personal objects and their afterlives in the Polish and Belarusian post-Holocaust shtetls

Magdalena Waligórska ^a and Ina Sorkina^b

^aInstitute for Advanced Study, Berlin, Germany; ^bCenter for East European Studies, Warsaw University, Warsaw, Poland

ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which Jewish personal belongings that have been appropriated by gentiles during, and in the aftermath of, the Holocaust have been identified, demanded back, passed down from generation to generation, and commodified. Focusing on Biłgoraj and Izbica (Poland), and Mir and Iūje (Belarus), our objective is to determine whether the Jewish identity of personal belongings appropriated by local non-Jewish communities during, or in the aftermath of, ‘Holocaust by bullets,’ survived in the postwar communities in which they have been circulating, and define what role they played for the postwar relations between Jews and non-Jews.

KEYWORDS

Dispossession of Jews; holocaust; personal objects; restitution; Poland; Belarus

It was dawn, on one late summer day in 1946, when Mordechaj Canin entered his hometown of Sokołów for the first time after the Catastrophe. While he was walking down deserted streets, taking in the wartime destruction, what caught his eye were the omnipresent Jewish objects. ‘The few women that appear [in the streets] are wearing clothes that with all certainty belonged to Jewish women before,’ he wrote later. ‘Curtains in the windows, furnishings in the shops – everything is Jewish.’¹ Canin, who managed to survive the Holocaust by fleeing over Shanghai to Palestine, and returned to Sokołów as a correspondent of the Yiddish *Forverts*, was among the very first Jewish reporters who visited the Polish shtetls ravaged by the Holocaust. Travelling incognito as a British journalist, he kept a sharp eye on the Jewish belongings that he constantly spotted on his way across Poland: silver Sabbath candlesticks in a tavern, a pair of boots insulated with fragments of a Torah scroll, a blouse sewn together out of prayer shawls.² If Jewish life in Poland appeared to Canin as nothing but ‘ruins and cinders,’ one thing was clear – the Jewish belongings were having a second life.

*

CONTACT Magdalena Waligórska  waligoma@hu-berlin.de

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The subject of dispossession that took place in the context of the Holocaust has been addressed by a large body of literature. Much of this work has concentrated, however, on financial dispossession, giving priority to the takeover of businesses, real estate, valuables and gold.³ Personal belongings, such as clothes, shoes or household items, if they were in focus of inquiry at all, were most often discussed as items amassed, processed, and eventually exhibited in concentration camps.⁴ Only few studies so far have addressed the topic of Jewish personal possessions, and their afterlife within the local communities that appropriated them during World War II, and its aftermath.⁵

Yet Jewish clothes and shoes continued to be worn in postwar Europe. Jewish bedlinen, tableware, and cutlery remained in use in gentile households for decades to come. And the more durable objects still circulate on the local markets, sometimes specifically advertised as *Jewish* objects.⁶ This article examines the ways in which Jewish personal belongings have been identified, demanded back, passed down from generation to generation, commodified, and, finally, collected, traded, and exhibited in Poland and Belarus. Our objective is to determine whether the Jewish identity of Jewish personal belongings appropriated by local non-Jewish communities during, or in the aftermath of, Holocaust by bullets, survived in the postwar communities in which they have been circulating, and define what role they played for the postwar relations between Jews and non-Jews.

While the plunder of Jewish belongings was a transnational phenomenon that took place in a number of European countries that found themselves under the Nazi occupation, the scale, the traumatic context, and the direct relation of dispossession to genocidal violence makes this phenomenon particularly poignant in Eastern Europe.⁷ On the territory of the so-called 'Holocaust by bullets,' where the killing of Jews typically took place by means of mass shootings carried out in the immediate vicinity of human dwellings, and in full view (and, sometimes, with the participation) of the local non-Jewish inhabitants, most of the victims' belongings were not shipped away by the Nazi occupiers but remained in the area.⁸ Yet the dispossession of Jews that took place in these territories is often underestimated as not economically significant. Dariusz Stola, looking into the Polish case, makes an estimate that '[c]ompared with the transfer of property such as enterprises, securities, real estate, and valuable objects taken by the German state, the amount of goods stolen by Polish individuals cannot be described as large,' although he does note that 'for those affected, it certainly had severe consequences.'⁹ Since plunder of household items and personal belongings was a nearly universal experience for Jews under the German occupation, and this kind of loss affected a very large population, its magnitude should be calculated not only in pure market value of the appropriated belongings, but also in the scale of the phenomenon. Stola is right, however, that the appropriation of Jewish belongings by local non-Jewish populations, both during the periods of ghettoization, hiding, and in the context of genocidal violence had grave consequences for the victims. The theft of personal belongings meant a higher risk of death by disease or starvation, when in hiding.¹⁰ Given that clothes also expressed the social status of their owners, and had an emotional value, their loss had devastating psychological effects. As Leora Auslander puts it, expropriation 'not only facilitated acceptance by non-Jews of the marginalization and ultimate disappearance of their Jewish neighbors, but it also helped erode Jews' capacity for mobilization and resistance.'¹¹ Robbing Jews of their clothes was, therefore, the first step in the process of dehumanization.¹²

The transfer of Jewish personal belongings to non-Jews was neither a marginal nor an unimportant phenomenon. As Anna Wylegała's research in Ukraine demonstrates, neighbors that knew Jewish victims well could be very efficient at gaining access to certain valuable items before Germans could.¹³ The time frame in which they acted was also longer than that of the Nazi perpetrators, because appropriation of Jewish personal belongings would start already before the beginning of German repressive policies (e.g. transferring objects for safekeeping to non-Jews) and continue long after the genocidal violence (e.g. in the form of mass grave robbery). Non-Jewish local populations had the chance to appropriate Jewish belongings during the period of ghettoization, hiding, and in the wake of executions, when the clothes of the victims would at times be used as currency, or an incentive to mobilize local help in the genocide.¹⁴ This expropriation of Jews by their neighbors was therefore gradual, had different modalities, and sometimes took ambivalent forms, in which the boundaries between help and barter, on the one hand, and extortion and exploitation, on the other, were often blurred.

Writing about the Jewish belongings stolen from the victims of concentration camps and shipped to Germany for redistribution, Bożena Shallcross, puts forward a thesis that '[w]ith the notable exception of religious artefacts, Jewishness was quickly stripped from the identity of [such] everyday objects.'¹⁵ The processes of circulation, transformation and recycling, in her view, 'disperse[d] the permanence of [their] identity.'¹⁶ While this might have been true in the case of Jewish belongings processed by the Nazi genocidal industry and shipped from General Government to the Reich, the Jewish possessions appropriated *en masse* during Holocaust by bullets had a different trajectory, because they most often remained within the communities that were very well aware of their provenance. As Carolin Lange demonstrates, this was true also in the case of Germany, where, even in big cities, new tenants of apartments vacated by deported Jews, and individuals who purchased Jewish personal objects at auctions were well aware of the provenance of this property.¹⁷ In the Polish context, even the linguistic devices that allowed to domesticate Jewish property, such as the Polish term '*pożydowski*' or 'post-Jewish,' as Zuzanna Dziuban aptly observed, actually only reinforced 'the relationship between the dispossessed objects and the people to whom they once belonged.'¹⁸ Thus the knowledge of what used to be Jewish lived on in the local communities of the former shtetls, encoded in the very language devised to obfuscate the actual modalities of plunder, and suggest an ethically acceptable 'takeover' of 'abandoned' property or even some process of peaceful 'inheritance.'

The question, however, of what happened with this local knowledge and of whether Jewish objects retained their 'identity' over time, has not yet been systematically addressed. As Polish historian, Dariusz Stola, argues, the reason for this neglect might lie in the fact that while '[t]he theory that collective, yet subconscious knowledge of the crimes against the owners clings to 'former Jewish' property is interesting ... it remains very difficult to verify empirically.'¹⁹ While there is a valid point here that the research on the provenance of stolen objects is by definition very challenging, the misconception that the relationship we try to capture here is fundamentally one 'between humans and objects,' and not humans and other humans, has potentially lead to overlooking the trail of significance Jewish objects still possessed in the post-war economies of East-Central Europe.²⁰

Thinking of Jewish personal possessions, transferred for safekeeping, bartered, plundered, or stolen during the Holocaust, as inextricably embedded in the relationships between their original owners and those who took them for safekeeping, acquired them in exchange for food, or removed from the body of a murdered victim widens the lens of analysis. If we look at appropriation not in terms of a mere relation between a human and an object, but factoring in how objects 'mediate relations between subjects,'²¹ we gain a better insight into the wealth of experiences 'lodged'²² in the objects, and the way they acquire significance for both the individuals directly concerned and the entire communities. Looking at the theft/loss/commodification of certain categories of personal and ritual objects can also give us insight into how individuals and communities negotiated the boundaries of taboo in the situation of social anomie.

Domestic belongings and clothes have a very special status which makes their plunder or loss result in a 'sense of violation.'²³ As Auslander notes, 'homes and the goods they contain' are central for our psychological stability and help constitute our identity.²⁴ Objects that have daily contact with our bodies, like bedlinen, cutlery, or shoes are particularly important for us as 'modes of communication, ... memory cues ... [and] expressions of the psyche.'²⁵ Among these personal objects, clothes have a critical role to play. They are central in creating what social theorists call a 'civilized body'²⁶ or 'cultural body,'²⁷ which is individualized from others, and materially and politically malleable. Clothes are both our 'most intimate environment'²⁸ and a medium by which we generate what Norbert Elias termed an 'affective wall' between our bodies and those of others.²⁹ They protect, signify, help constitute our social status, habitus and belonging, but also become 'appendages of [the] body,'³⁰ extensions of our physical bodies. It is for this reason that appropriation of clothes can have particularly devastating psychological effects, as it targets one's sense of identity and psychological well-being. When it concerns dead bodies, it additionally constitutes a heavy breach of taboo, as dressing or covering the body is a form of caring for the dead and part of the burial ritual in many religions, including both Judaism and Christianity.³¹ Clothes of the deceased also play a crucial role in the process of mourning, as they can incarnate for the bereft their dead loved ones.³² Finally, clothes of crime victims can also be seen, as Laura Levitt puts it, as 'witnesses to the atrocities,' both in terms of the material evidence they carry (bloodstains, bullet holes), and as quasi-religious relics that can be perceived as sacred.³³

Appropriation of household objects can also violate taboo when, as a result of plunder, objects, which are traditionally precluded from being commoditized are turned into commodities.³⁴ Such 'commodities by diversion'³⁵ misused in the wake of the Holocaust included personal and communal ritual objects such as prayer books, mezuzahs, prayer shawls, and matzevot, which have fallen prey to mass scale plunder, trade, and profane use across East-Central Europe.³⁶ The fact that, already in the immediate aftermath of the war, when Jewish organizations faced an enormous task of providing help for emaciated, destitute, and traumatized Holocaust survivors, the Jewish Religious Council (*Naczelna Rada Religijna*) in Poland allocated special funds to purchase back appropriated Torah scrolls indicates that this kind of appropriation was considered particularly injurious and requiring an urgent redress.³⁷

This sense of profound violation, and of loss that accompanied Jewish survivors in the aftermath of the Holocaust raises the question about long-term consequences of

dispossession. Given that personal belongings passed down from generation to generation can be powerful symbolic vehicles that connect next generations with their ancestors, how does their loss affect the intergenerational processes of identity-building? How can these material links between the descendants of Holocaust survivors and their ancestors' *shtetl* life be sustained in the absence of inheritable physical objects?

Our study focuses on Jewish personal belongings that changed hands in the result of the Holocaust in small communities which had a particularly high percentage of Jewish population before the Second World, and where such transfer of commodities, including plunder, barter, and transfer for safekeeping had a very widespread character. We also look at what long-term consequences this mass dispossession had for the complicit local communities, Jewish survivors, and their descendants. Four small towns in south-eastern Poland and western Belarus, located on either side of the new Polish-Soviet border as of 1944, serve us as case studies: Izbica (4,500 inhabitants; as of 1939, 92% Jews) and Biłgoraj (8,000 inhabitants; 60% Jews) in eastern Poland; and Iūje (5,000 inhabitants, 76% Jews) and Mir (6,000 inhabitants, 60% Jews) in western Belarus, allowing us to trace the patterns of dispossession from a comparative perspective.³⁸ Zooming into this heavily multiethnic territory that formed the heart of the traditional Jewish urban settlements, home of two-thirds of Poland's prewar Jewish population, we look at the locales that both represented the paradigmatic locus of [Jewish] communality³⁹ and were the hardest hit by the Holocaust, undergoing a major de- and repopulation in its aftermath.⁴⁰ Based on fieldwork in these four locations and a set of archival sources, including testimonies of survivors, memoirs, *yizkor bikher*, post-war trials, and our own oral history interviews with Holocaust survivors, their descendants, and local inhabitants, this article proposes a microhistorical and comparative perspective on Holocaust-related dispossession that took place outside of the major urban centers and death camps – in the small local communities.

The pain of recognition

We find the first evidence of the fact that the provenance of Jewish possessions circulating in the local postwar economies was legible to the contemporaries in the testimonies of survivors. Jews returning from hiding or from the Soviet interior are the first to identify their own belongings, or those belonging to their next of kin, in the hands of the non-Jewish locals. A unique Jewish perspective on this phenomenon is delivered by the diary of Marcelli Najder who survived in hiding in Kołomyja and, using his faked Christian identity, came to Izbica (Poland) in 1945 to take a post of a pharmacist. In this time, he witnessed how local Poles came to the pharmacy to cash in different valuable objects of Jewish provenance:

So there is this certain Mrs. Jagoda from Ostrzyca who comes every second day, bringing something else for sale: a watch, a ring, a small diamond, a bigger diamond, golden ruble coins, all of it supposedly family heirlooms. Only why do all these things stink of garlic?⁴¹

Najder's sarcasm fails to conceal the extent to which these postwar transactions hurt and disturb him as a survivor. Despite the fact that he is not a local in Izbica, and does not actually have the chance to identify any of the valuables that are being brought to the pharmacy, he is able to read the clues that reveal a pattern. The uneasiness of his

clients, the unlikely riches in their hands, and the clandestine character of the exchange are to him unmistakable signals that point to an unspoken collective knowledge about the true identity of these objects that emanate their Jewishness in such an obvious way that it seems to be a nearly physical, olfactory sensation.

What for Najder is an inkling, for many Jewish survivors, returning to their home shtetls and recognizing their belongings worn and used by their neighbors, was a certainty. Rachel Prozer, who after the liberation briefly returned to her family house in Józefów near Biłgoraj, met a gentile man she describes as being of ‘the better class,’ who moved into a Jewish house across the street. In her testimony for the Shoah Foundation, recorded in 2000, she describes the moment in which the neighbor tells her about how other people allegedly came to plunder her house, while she herself had witnessed from her hideout behind a wall how *he* entered their house to plunder after her parents were hunted down and shot dead by the Germans:

And he came in and took my father’s coat. It was a brand new one, made for the holidays. My brother was a tailor, he made it for him. And when he [the neighbor] walked out, he looked at it himself, if it’s worth taking. Just like he paid for it! Who knows what else he took [...] And we came back and I went into his house and he started talking about the way they cleaned out our house. [...] And I know they cleaned up because when I came back nothing was left, only the blood from my mother and father that I had to wash away. So, naturally, I didn’t tell him I saw him take the coat and who knows what else.⁴²

It is still evident from the interview, recorded decades after the event, how painful it was for Rachel Prozer to confront the neighbor who stole an item of clothing that for her represented love and care within her, now murdered, family. It is the act of the neighbor’s trying it on, stroking the textile, checking the quality of the garment, gestures which Rachel replays in the interview, that are particularly distressing to her. This bodily contact of the pillaging neighbor with a personal belonging of her murdered father appears to her as a form of disrespecting her dead, an act violating the intimacy of their family life, and a form of violence.

Rachel Prozer feels helpless in the confrontation, and allows the neighbor to save his face, refraining from confronting him about the theft. Many other survivors from Poland, likewise, recount their fear of claiming any of their possessions back, or report violence they encountered on merely appearing in their town of origin. Sylvia Prypstein, who briefly returned to Biłgoraj to see what became of her family house, found it occupied by gentiles and gave up any thought of reclaiming. ‘I didn’t go in,’ she recollects, ‘I was scared. If I would go in, they could shoot me, too. Coming back for my property? That’s theirs [...] And I was gonna go in and ask for it and risk my life?’⁴³ Philip Bialowitz and Thomas Blatt from Izbica not only claimed nothing back but had to both escape the town, faced with direct violence from their neighbors.⁴⁴

There are, however, also some accounts of survivors, who demanded their personal belongings back, and even took steps to bring the robbers to justice. Boruch Wermut of Biłgoraj, who survived the Holocaust in hiding, was among the first Jews who returned to the town after liberation. His wife and two daughters, who likewise went into hiding, were captured and executed by the Germans with the help of Polish collaborators, one of whom Wermut randomly encountered in the street upon his return.⁴⁵ Distressed by the

fact that the Gestapo collaborationist not only enjoyed freedom, but also public respect in postwar Biłgoraj, Wermut decided to denounce him. While the story of his quest for justice provides many insights into the predicament of Holocaust survivors in postwar Poland, one remarkable aspect in Wermut's court depositions concerns the psychological impact of despoliation on returning Holocaust survivors.

In numerous depositions given in front of the Polish police forces in 1945 and 1946, as well as during the trial that began in 1947, Boruch Wermut comes back to one scene that may not have had a great significance for his case, but which deeply distressed him – the confrontation with the wife of a Polish Nazi collaborator, whom he spots in the street of Biłgoraj wearing the clothes of his murdered wife.⁴⁶ His deposition from 1946, given in front of the regional court in Kraków, reads:

When, in 1943, I was in the forest together with my wife, Waliłko came, captured my wife and brought her to the Gestapo, where she was murdered. The coat and the dress of my wife I found in 1944 and took them back by force from Mrs. Waliłko.⁴⁷

Despite the fact that Boruch Wermut eyewitnessed other traumatic moments, including the murder of his two children, the story of the coat and the dress looms large in his testimony and is one that he clearly wishes should be recorded in the trial proceedings. While the fact of wearing the clothes of a murdered person is incriminating evidence in itself, it seems there is more that propels Wermut to repetitively return to this detail of his story. Seeing personal belongings of his loved ones in the hands of the perpetrators appears to be more distressing to him than the loss of other, more materially valuable, possessions, which do not find a mention in the depositions. The story also makes its way to the testimonies of other witnesses in the trial. Lejzer Fruchtländer, another survivor from Biłgoraj who is called to testify in the case, also reports the scene and explains that Boruch Wermut claimed the coat back 'for the sake of the memory of his wife.'⁴⁸ Reclaiming the clothes of a murdered family member does not seem to have any immediate practical use for the survivor, and, indeed, for a Jewish man in postwar Poland to forcibly remove the clothes off a Christian woman, even if we do not know where exactly that scene played, was an act of defiance that could have had grave consequences. Boruch Wermut decides to do it only because there is more at stake here than material restitution. Claiming the clothes back is an act of retribution, mourning, and an attempt to save an object that was not meant to become a commodity. It can also be understood, as Leora Auslander proposes, as a form of symbolically reuniting with the dead and coping with their loss (Figure 1).⁴⁹

Survivors returning to their towns often witnessed how Jewish ritual objects and personal possessions that were proscribed from profane use, became commodities that were traded, recycled and repurposed at will.⁵⁰ This desecration constituted a great source of pain for the returnees, who were sometimes moved to save such objects. Mordechaj Rapaport, who evacuated himself with the Red Army and returned to Biłgoraj in late September 1944, mere weeks after the liberation, reports one episode like that.

I stepped into some shop to buy a block of butter. I received it wrapped into a page from the Vilnius edition of the Talmud. I was standing there, petrified, remembering how hard it was for a Jew to buy the Vilnius Talmud for a studying son in law. I had the sensation as if there



Figure 1. A repurposed Jewish ritual washing cup on sale at the local souvenir shop in Mir, 2022. Photo: Ina Sorkina.

was the melody of ‘So speaketh Abaji and Raba’ emanating from these pages. I left, threw away the butter, and pocketed the sacred piece of text.⁵¹

Like Wermut, Rapaport salvages a sacred object from its role as a commodity. By recognizing its provenance and true value, and removing it from the site of desecration he reconstitutes the sacred character of the now fragmented and abject item.

A similar scenario of recognition, shock, and moral outrage played out in postwar Mir, Belarus. Chaim Itzkovitz, who witnessed how the Germans shot his father to death outside of their house, was able to identify the complicit neighbor by the shoes, which had belonged to his late father. Itzkovitz reported on the man and then testified against him in a trial held in Minsk. His account of how he confronted the collaborator indicates how, despite the fact that entire local communities shared the knowledge about wartime acts of collaboration and theft, perpetrators often felt confident that they would not face any consequences:

- Interviewer:* How were you able to find him [the collaborator] after the war?
- Chaim Itzkovitz:* Why, he was at home, he didn’t hide. He didn’t run away, he was at home, but he didn’t know that we knew everything what was going on around. You understand. He thought: he did things that nobody knows. But ... people talk.
- Interviewer:* Did you see him when you were in hiding?
- Chaim Itzkovitz:*

No, we saw our father's boots, he was wearing them. It's a very easy sign, no?⁵²

Such instances of Jewish survivors identifying the clothes of their family members, or their own, were not limited to wartime and immediate postwar years only. Zoya Mironovna Poznyak, a Holocaust survivor from Mir, recognized her own dress on the sister of a former policeman, during a Sunday walk through the town in the 1960s. The discovery distressed her so much that she began to tear the dress off the woman in the middle of the street – a fact that is vividly remembered by the local inhabitants to this day.⁵³ These, sometimes violent, acts of retrieving stolen items of clothing are remarkable in that they take place in a context in which reclaiming Jewish property comes with a high personal risk to the survivors and, as we already noted above, is often abandoned altogether. Rachel Prozer, who, on her return from hiding, recognizes some of her family's personal belongings, including her mother's jewelry, refrains from claiming anything back, for fear of anti-Jewish violence.⁵⁴ Sometimes, the survivors' only chance to regain their own belongings is to buy them back from the current owners. Majsiej Koščar, who, after his return to Iŭje, finds an oak table that used to belong to his family, decides to buy it back from the present owner rather than to claim it back.⁵⁵

Clothes, however, which are the most personalized, intimate, and often unique, hand-made items, understandably trigger more emotions than other objects and inspire potentially risky attempts to reclaim them. Given that Jewish clothes, especially those that changed hands as a result of the despoliation of dead bodies, directly point to the genocidal violence that enabled the appropriation, their retrieval has multiple layers of significance, including the legal, ethical, and psychological dimensions. They become incriminating evidence in court, keepsakes that demand reclamation to honor the memory of the deceased, and symbolic objects that allow victims to regain a sense of social control, and to transition from the identity of a despoiled subject of violence to that of an active agent and citizen who regains his/her 'civilized body.'

Transmitted knowledge

While for Jewish survivors the clothes belonging to their loved ones play the role of markers of guilt, which may trigger retributive measures, local non-Jews are also aware of the incriminating nature of these objects and quickly work out strategies to handle confrontations with Jewish survivors. Rubin Segalowicz, who joined a partisan unit in the vicinity of Iŭje in Western Belarus, on one of the missions made a stop at the village of Mišukovičy [Pol: Miszukowicze] to find out about the fate of his girlfriend, Ida. Walking around the village, he suddenly saw how the locals, upon recognizing him, started throwing Ida's personal belongings and clothes out of the window. Having realized that Rubin, an armed partisan, was checking on a Jewish house, they decided it would be safest to instantly 'return' all the objects the Jewish family entrusted with them for safekeeping.⁵⁶ Majsiej Koščar of Iŭje witnessed a different strategy upon his return from the Soviet interior after the liberation. Instead of returning Jewish property to its legitimate owner, Koščar's neighbors would hide objects originating from his utterly pillaged and devastated house to conceal their participation in the plunder.

While, directly upon his return, Koščar spotted an outdoor toilet that belonged to his family in the backyard of a neighbor's house, on the very next morning, the privy was no longer in view, taken away or dismantled.⁵⁷

Contemporary field research in former shtetls likewise reveals that the knowledge about possessions looted from Jewish households is still present in the affected local communities. Viktor Sakel, collector of Judaica, and owner of a small private museum in Mir, started collecting vintage objects from his town in the late 1990s. Over the last two decades, walking around the town with a metal detector, searching through old attics, and purchasing old objects from private households, he managed to amass an impressive amount of personal items, which were identified to him by local inhabitants as Jewish. Sakel, who was born in 1961, and has an interest in the town's history, exhibits in his museum a number of personal belongings of Jews, including clothes, silverware, furniture, music records, etc. While some of his exhibits are markedly Jewish objects, like books, dreidels, or amulets, the provenance of others was divulged by their former keepers who, many decades after the war, still knew that the possessions used to belong to Jewish families.⁵⁸ Owner of a souvenir stand next to the Mir castle, Siarhej Chura, who likewise trades in antiquities and occasionally has Jewish items on sale, also reported about how locals brought him various Jewish possessions, such as tableware, copper pots, suitcases or irons.⁵⁹ The Jewish provenance of the objects is usually established based on the house they originate from. The pre-Holocaust topography of the town and the knowledge which houses used to be Jewish turns out to be almost universal in these small communities, even among the inhabitants born (long) after the war (Figure 2).

During our fieldwork in the town of Iŭje, local inhabitants were also able to point to daily objects of Jewish provenance. Ivan Bujko, a hobby historian and collector who runs a small private museum in his own house, receives a notification from local construction workers whenever a formerly Jewish house undergoes renovation or is being demolished. Fellow Iŭjans also bring him objects originating from Jewish households for sale. His account suggests the existence of a collective mental map of Jewish property in Iŭje that continues to be present in the minds of the town's inhabitants many decades after the Holocaust.⁶⁰ What is more, our conversations with current and former inhabitants of Iŭje, both Jewish and non-Jewish, revealed an extensive collective knowledge of the local history of Holocaust-related dispossession. One informant, who grew up in postwar Iŭje in a mixed Jewish/non-Jewish family, remembers that the local community transmitted knowledge about a family who, during the Nazi occupation, promised to hide a few Jews and then robbed, and murdered them instead. Members of this family, according to our informant, 'were not respected in Iŭje and people would distance themselves from them.'⁶¹ A similar social stigma allegedly surrounded another family who engaged in robbing a mass grave in the nearby forest.⁶² Our informants, some of whom belonged to the second generation born after the war, or moved into the town as late as the 1970s, could still point to houses formerly owned by Jews, identify individuals who profited from Jewish possessions to a particularly large extent, or those who desecrated the mass graves, which suggests that the knowledge about dispossession of Jews was universal in these locales.⁶³ One interviewee pointed to the family of a former policeman, who, after the war, managed to finance higher education of three of his daughters.⁶⁴ Similar stories concerned a physician, locally nicknamed 'the



Figure 2. An item of clothing identified as Jewish from Viktor Sakel's collection in Mir. Photo: Pavel Sanko, 2014.

golden doctor,' who, in the words of one of the respondents, 'went to college for Jewish gold.'⁶⁵

Within the rural communities that participated in the mass dispossession of Jews during Holocaust by bullets, the identity of Jewish belongings, such as clothes, shoes, or even gold, was not 'dispersed' after the war. The knowledge about what used to belong to Jews not only carried on long after the Holocaust, but got transmitted from generation to generation. What is more, the transactions including these possessions

continue to this day. And even though, seven decades after the war, the objective value of these Jewish objects decreased, it is now the 'Jewish identity' of sometimes inconspicuous, fragmented, and materially worthless objects that defines their memorial and market value today.

Jewish detritus

Viktor Sakel of Mir is used to showing around descendants of Holocaust survivors who visit the town. But one of the most striking encounters he remembers concerns a house located right next to his museum.

This house next door, which I'm renovating for a bed and breakfast, was inhabited by people, Jews, who live in Australia today. This year they came here. They were walking around, looking. I ask them: 'What's up?' 'We used to live here, our mom and granddad lived here' ... I went upstairs with them, to the attic, and there was this one beam with a chalk drawing of a little human figure and the handwritten name Lala or Lyusia—a Jewish name. And it turned out it was their grandmother. They were almost in tears: [and asked me] 'Give us at least a little chunk of this house'. And I cut a piece, ... and gave it to them. They wrapped it in a napkin and took it with them to Australia as a keepsake from their homeland, a memory of their grandmother and grandfather.⁶⁶

The detritus of past Jewish life, including the raw materials that constituted Jewish property, such as pieces of wood, bricks, and nails, not only still possess their 'Jewish identity,' but also focalize the fascination of the contemporaries. This is true for the descendants of survivors, for whom these material remains constitute valuable relics, but also for local antiquities dealers and memory brokers.

Biłgoraj-born artist, Dominika Macocha, whose work addresses the lack of critical engagement with Jewish heritage in Biłgoraj, turned to such material to visualize the taboos that surround the dispossession of Jews in her town. In a series of installations titled *'Dom'* [A House], she used smoldered planks from a demolished Jewish house in Biłgoraj that she collected herself from the neglected ruin. Processing the charred wood into paper and eventually a powerfully expressive book with empty white pages, the artist visualized how the dark chapters of the town's history, including wartime complicity of some of its inhabitants in anti-Jewish violence, and dispossession – as well as the post-war neglect of Jewish sites – become transformed into a beautified and exculpating narrative of harmonious multiculturalism that obscures the truth.⁶⁷

The instinct to salvage, but also to capitalize on, material shards of past Jewish life exists also in other shtetls we have investigated. While the head of the local library in Iūje found it important to collect scrap metal from a recently demolished Jewish house (Figure 3) to conserve it as an exhibit,⁶⁸ local collectors Viktor Sakel and Ivan Bujko scavenged the site of the former synagogues in Mir and Iūje respectively, extracting small metal construction elements, bricks, nails, and old keys for their collections.⁶⁹ The high demand for material Jewish traces is also reflected on the Judaica market, where even fragmented, and damaged objects of daily use find their buyers. As souvenir stand owner in Mir, Siarhej Chura, points out, Jewish objects are in high demand and sell out very quickly, mostly to Jewish tourists from Israel and the US.⁷⁰ Viktor Sakel from Mir offers some of such objects on sale in his museum, too, including small metal dreidels he found with the help of a metal detector, and fragments of Jewish



Figure 3. S moldered planks from a demolished Jewish house in Biłgoraj. Photo: Dominika Macocha 'Dom,' 2021.

tombstones converted after the war into grindstones. A similar practice exists in rural Poland, too, where small items from Jewish households are being offered on sale to Jewish tourists.⁷¹

Such transactions point both to the fact that, over seventy years after the war, Jewish personal objects in private possession are identifiable as such, and that there exists a widespread expectation within the local moral economy that Jewish things naturally remain a source of income for their custodians. While the looting of Jewish property during, and in the aftermath of, the Holocaust might have carried a degree of social stigma within the local communities, which is evidenced both by the stories of unethical enrichment of some, particularly active, individuals, and by the reluctance of many respondents to address that topic at all, present-day transactions involving Jewish objects seem to inspire fewer reservations for the local individuals involved in them. On site and online trade in Judaica does include personal items, ritual objects, or even gravestones, and antiquities dealers emphasize rather than conceal the Jewish provenance of objects that are otherwise unmarked as Jewish (e.g. furniture or cutlery).⁷²

This commodification, however, is painful for Jews who become the addressees of such business offers. Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer of Biłgoraj, on his visit to Poland from Israel in 1990, was offered a bloodstained and damaged Torah scroll for the price of 200 USD by a man he met at his hotel. Shocked and appalled, Wircer was considering salvaging the scroll, but eventually decided against it, fearing that he would not be allowed to leave the country with such a historic object.⁷³ Years later, in 2006, a damaged Torah scroll resurfaced in Biłgoraj again, this time offered on sale to the local Isaac Bashevis Singer Society, just established in town by a handful of cultural activists. The purchase and the ritual funeral of the scroll thus became the very first activity of

the association, whose members felt obliged to rectify the historic wrongs, by burying it at the Jewish cemetery, rather than exhibiting it.⁷⁴

The question of who should own such ‘Jewish detritus,’ and how it should be handled continues to trigger a lot of emotion and, at times, conflicts. Dalia Bar, a child survivor who came to visit Biłgoraj in 2010 from Israel, was able to find her ancestral house still intact. Having met the current Polish owners, she discovered that they had in their possession a collection of family photographs, documents, letters, and small memorabilia that they had found in the attic. When Dalia asked to have them returned to her, however, the present owners refused, arguing that they consider donating these items to a museum and want to be credited there as donors.⁷⁵ Very obviously, the objects had a huge emotional value for the survivor, who was ready to pay any price to regain them. The conflict over the attic box, however, revealed that what was at stake was not financial profit at all. Instead, it was the question of power and custodianship over these former Jewish belongings, which, decades after the end of the war, gained value as part of the local Jewish heritage.

As these vignettes poignantly illustrate, in post-transformation East Central Europe, even ostensibly valueless, defragmented objects may become contested or coveted commodities just by virtue of their Jewishness. The detritus of the Holocaust: damaged scriptures, repurposed ritual objects, metal scrap, and salvaged bric a brac become priceless relics, whose symbolic meaning as the last material vestiges of the shtetl either invests them with a new market value, or precludes them from monetary transactions. Indeed, the relationship that their current custodians, former owners, or their descendants have with such objects sometimes escapes what Bill Brown termed ‘the cultural logic of capitalism.’⁷⁶ While appropriated Jewish possessions still circulate in the local economy as commodities, both their trade and the attempts to decommunitize them reveal a ‘moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.’⁷⁷ Appropriated Jewish possessions can be prized mementos, or overpriced merchandise, but also remain objects invested with power. On the one hand, they are incriminating evidence – hence locals are usually reluctant in identifying objects like that in their households. Their origin is stigmatizing, and there is some evidence that such possessions can cause psychological discomfort.⁷⁸ On the other hand, Jewish personal objects that have been preserved in the local communities who looted them are invested with power because they provide the material warp around which to weave the narrative of local history. Transformed into exhibits, they have the power to ‘bear witness’ to appropriation, dispossession, and plunder. But they can also narrate the story of salvaging and preserving Jewish heritage. They ‘speak’ through those who curate them.

Ersatz heirlooms

Mass dispossession of Jews and the fact that Holocaust survivors had to relaunch their postwar lives with very few or none of their original possessions caused a sense of loss that endured over generations. The longing to possess something ‘authentic,’ relating to pre-Holocaust intact shtetl life thus accompanied many descendants of Holocaust survivors, who missed a material link with their family history. This created, on the one hand, a demand for the locally-propelled Judaica market, on the other, however, it

spawned creative ways of engaging with material objects ‘from the shtetl.’ One genre of objects that fill the mental void left by dispossession are ‘ersatz heirlooms.’

Tamara Baradach, daughter of a Holocaust survivor from Iūje who emigrated to Israel in the 1990s, occasionally deals with such requests for objects that are to satisfy the nostalgia for shtetl materiality.

The mother of my friend, Nechama, was nicknamed *Gutenmorgile* because she used to have a cow or two, and she would deliver milk around Iūje in the morning, and greet everyone with a ‘good morning.’ Nechama once saw a churn and asked me ‘what is that?’ I tell her it’s a churn, you put cream there and then you need to beat it. ‘I want one! I’m sure we must have had a churn at our house.’ [she exclaimed] ... A friend of mine found a churn at the market in Lida and bought it. I put it into my suitcase and brought it to Israel ... Then Nechama saw a fly swatter in my cottage and said ‘at our place in Iūje, we had this too, I want a fly swatter.’ One time in Iūje at the cashier, she saw an abacus and decided that, if her father’s brother was a book-keeper, they must have had an abacus in the house ... Now she has the churn, the fly swatter, and the abacus hanging on the wall at her house [in Israel]. This is how you preserve memory.⁷⁹

The will to possess daily objects that *could have* made part of one’s family’s prewar household may reflect an attempt to reify a nostalgic vision of the shtetl that is authentic, quaintly premodern, and homely. But it also responds to an acute sense of deprivation. The nearly total dispossession of Jews affected not only the first generation of Holocaust survivors, but also their children and grandchildren, who never had the chance to inherit family heirlooms that would materially relate them to their ancestors. This void is filled by other objects that become spaces of projection, and ersatz heirlooms that enable an affective link with the daily lives of one’s ancestors.

Katarzyna Weintraub, author and translator, who was born in a Jewish family in postwar Szczecin, articulated this kind of need very poignantly. As her family moved into an apartment vacated by expelled Germans, they discovered a china set that was just like one that they used to own back in Vilnius.

In this omnipresent formerly German reality the expression ‘family heirloom’ [in original: ‘*po babci*’: inherited from one’s grandmother] was a kind of a metaphor, a mental shortcut referring exclusively to the Rosenthal set of thin ivory porcelain. It was an identical set that grandfather bought for grandmother in 1932, on their trip to Berlin. Irony, or maybe destiny, wanted it that this ‘*poniemiecki*’ service connected, like a thin thread, the world of our Szczecin house with that of the Vilnius Antokol, the home of the grandparents I never knew.⁸⁰

Ersatz-heirlooms of this kind appear in multiple postwar accounts of Holocaust survivors and their children, who seek a material medium that could embody the affective link to their dead. Sonia Komissierova, survivor from Iūje, had a notebook into which she copied in handwriting the list of names of Iūje’s Holocaust victims. Though the list itself was just a copy of the entries from the town’s *yizkor bukh*, published in Tel-Aviv in 1968, which at some point made its way to Iūje, the much consulted and worn-out notebook soon received the status of a relic in Komissierova’s family. After the family emigrated to Israel in 1994, and she passed away, it was inherited by her daughter, who also cherishes it as a valuable memento.⁸¹ For Mordechaj Rapaport from Biłgoraj, who emigrated to Australia after the war, a 1973 Israeli reprint of a book by his grandfather, Rabbi Szmuel Eljahu Szwedzszarf, originally

printed in Biłgoraj in 1934, was one of two artefacts in his possession that, in his family's account, were 'from Poland.'⁸²

As we have already seen, also the descendants of Holocaust survivors who come to visit the shtetls their families originated from search for objects that they could take back with them as keepsakes. Sometimes, they are not even artefacts, but elements of the natural environment. Ivan Bujko of Iūje, a retired forester, who often accompanies Jewish visitors around his town, remembers how once he received a group of Israelis.

I took them into a copse. And they loved it so much! And they started collecting armfuls of fir cones. I asked them: 'why are you doing this?' And they said: it will be our souvenir of Iūje. We are going to bring them home, put them on the mantelpiece. We don't have such fragrances over there.'⁸³

These ersatz heirlooms that provide the next generations with a physical link with their families' past belong to the genres of postmemory. As Marianne Hirsch notes, the 'generation of postmemory,' who has inherited the trauma of the Holocaust from their parents, engages with the past by means of a 'performative index,' which is 'shaped more and more by affect, need, and desire' than 'authenticity and 'truth.'"⁸⁴ Since, in Hirsch's paradigm, postmemorial work revolves around 'reembodying,' physical objects which provide the illusion of being able to connect contemporaries to their ancestors, and communicate some truth about their experience are perfect vehicles of postmemory. While Hirsch focuses on photographs and the 'intimate material and affective connection' with the past they enable, three-dimensional objects that not only afford a more sensual experience, but also different ways of daily interaction and use are both a more compelling medium to imagine oneself as 'having-been-there' in the past reality these objects 'reembody,' and satisfy the desire to own possessions that are inheritable.

Conclusion

While differing historical ramifications, such as various levels of postwar anti-Jewish violence, or different legislation concerning the restitution of Jewish property in Poland and Belarus impact the postwar history of Jewish objects to some degree, the Polish and Belarusian cases show a lot of similarities too. To be sure, the more intense antisemitic violence in postwar Poland could mean that retrieving Jewish possessions by returning survivors was overall more difficult there than in Soviet Belarus.⁸⁵ Our case studies indicate, however, that it was not necessarily always the case, and other research from Belarus suggests that existing state anti-Semitism in the USSR made restitution of Jewish property difficult, even in the face of a generally less hostile reception of Holocaust survivors returning to their locales after 1944.⁸⁶ As our research illustrates, the experience of widespread plunder of Jewish personal property and the long-lasting collective memory of this fact is a common East-Central European experience.

Jewish personal belongings that still circulate within the local economies of the former shtetls are uncanny objects. They are ordinary, yet they haunt, shock, and trouble the contemporaries. They are both powerful and extremely vulnerable. Their power lies not only in their relic-like quality that renders them powerfully expressive, and emotionally impactful, but also in their role as holders of traumatic memory that have the

potential to ‘testify.’⁸⁷ In different narratives, they can stand for violence and dispossession, but also salvation and preservation. They can also be ‘read’ as material records of appropriation, cultural adaptation, and overwriting – like the washing cup from Mir (Figure 1) whose one handle was removed because it was redundant in its post-war profane use.⁸⁸ At the same time, as Holocaust artefacts, these objects are valuable ‘precisely for the ways in which they were used and abused’ and their appeal ‘lies in their very vulnerability.’⁸⁹

This complex and perhaps even self-contradictory nature of these objects poses a challenge to all who have tackled them during their post-Holocaust afterlife. For survivors who encountered them on their return into the shtetl the appropriated personal Jewish belongings were the key objects of their retribution efforts, incriminating evidence, and highly symbolic keepsakes that embodied their lost loved ones. Such objects had, however, also the power to re-traumatize Holocaust survivors. They were so charged with painful memories that their sheer presence caused pain. Boruch Wermut, who reclaimed his dead wife’s clothes, and Mordechaj Rapaport who salvaged a desecrated Talmud page, did not keep these objects in the long run, nor bequeath them to their children.⁹⁰ Even if they triggered indignation when spotted in the hands of the implicated neighbors, and provoked attempts to reclaim them, such possessions were also difficult to retain.

Jewish personal belongings in post-Holocaust shtetls are also a challenge to local activists and memory brokers, who are confronted with the question whether objects like that should be exhibited or rather treated as relics and, like in the case of religious scriptures, buried. Jewish artefacts in post-Holocaust Europe constitute valuable commodities. Not only as collector’s items, or nostalgic keepsakes traded to Jewish tourists, but also as the hard currency of memory that enables different stakeholders to create compelling narratives about their town’s past. The questions of ownership, preservation, and trade with such items are, therefore, fraught with a lot of tension, as they remain the object of intergroup transactions and conflicts.

Finally, appropriated Jewish possessions pose an immense challenge to local populations of former shtetls, as they are constant reminders about the dark past of these towns, and, possibly, about their own or their ancestors’ complicity in dispossessing the Jews. The knowledge of *what is Jewish* and *who profited* from appropriating Jewish belongings is universal in these small communities and it gets transferred from generation to generation. These objects, however inconspicuous, fragmentary or damaged, continue to hold an immense emotional fascination and provide points of ‘intrusion’ of the traumatic past into the present, triggering local efforts that both challenge and reproduce positions of privilege resulting from past violence.

In Michael Rothberg’s framework of the ‘implicated subject,’ which theorizes long-term effects of genocidal violence on those who were entangled in historical wrongdoing, it is only such ‘destabilizing intrusion’ of the past into the present that enables a sense of collective implication.⁹¹ ‘Implicated subjects,’ who are neither victims nor perpetrators, but ‘contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination,’ become aware of their predicament only if the historical injustices have a lasting link to the present.⁹² Seen from this perspective, Jewish personal possessions, distributed among whole communities and, at some point, likely to have been present in most

households of the former shtetls, offer the most unrelenting reminders about these communities' history of implication.

If, in the immediate post-war period, the retrieval of looted personal belongings constituted for many survivors a crucial step in the process of their psychological rehabilitation, and, sometimes, legal retribution, decades after the Holocaust, these objects still remain much contested. Even if they are reduced to fragments or abject matter, their Jewish imprint remains in place, rendering them intriguing, fascinating, and disquieting. It is, indeed, their 'identity,' not materiality, that decides about their social function and value today. In the case of ersatz-heirlooms, it is exclusively their 'identity,' anchored in a more or less arbitrary shell, that constitutes all their sentimental worth. As the last witnesses of the Holocaust pass away and the material artefacts of shtetl life, after nearly eight decades of utilization, are reduced to urban detritus, it is such fragmented remains, or even prosthetic objects that simulate the material connection with the shtetl, that will continue to provide the locus of postmemory.

Notes

1. Mordechaj Canin: *Przez ruiny i zgłiszcz: Podróż po stu zgłodzonych gminach żydowskich w Polsce*, Warszawa: Nisza, 2018, 223.
2. Canin: *Przez ruiny i zgłiszcz*, 112, 180, 194, 371.
3. Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, (eds.) *Klucze i kasa: o mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939-1950*, Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2014; Alina Skibińska "Problemy rewindykacji żydowskich nieruchomości w latach 1944-1950: Zagadnienia ogólne i szczegółowe (na przykładzie Szczecznieszyna) in Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka (eds.), *Klucze i kasa: O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939-1950*, Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2014, 493-573; Martin Dean, Constantin Goshler, and Philipp Ther, *Robbery and Restitution: The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2007; Yechiel Weizman, "Unsettled Possession: the Question of Ownership of Jewish Sites in Poland after the Holocaust from a Local Perspective," in Jacob Ari Labendz (ed.), *Jewish Property After 1945: Cultures and Economies of Loss, Recovery and Transfer*, London: Routledge, 2018, 34-53; Lukasz Krzyzanowski, *Ghost Citizens: Jewish Return to a Postwar City*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020: 228; Martin Dean, *Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Christoph Kreutzmüller and Jonathan R. Zatlin, eds. *Dispossession: Plundering German Jewry 1933-1953*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020; Gennadiy Boryak, Marina Dubik and Natalya Makovska, *Natsistske zoloto z Ukraini*, Kyiv, 1998; *Natsistskoe zoloto iz Belarusi: Dokumenty i materialy*, Minsk, 1998.
4. See, in particular: Bożena Shallcross, *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011; Liliane Weissberg, "In Plain Sight" in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, edited by Barbie Zelizer, London: The Athlone Press, 2001, 13-27; Laura Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2021, 101-112.
5. Anna Wylegała "About 'Jewish Things': Jewish Property in Eastern Galicia During World War II," *Yad Vashem Studies* 44 (2016): 83-143; Marta Duch-Dyngosz, "Materialne ślady trudnej przeszłości w dawnych shtetlach," in Michał Niezabitowski (ed.), *Miejsce po, miejsce bez*, Kraków: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2015, 47-58.
6. A number of such adds can be found on online trading platforms in Poland. For example for "Jewish" [*żydowski*] furniture or metal household items "Podstawka żydowska

- żeliwna pod piec kaflowy” <https://www.olx.pl/d/oferta/podstawka-zabytkowa-pozydowska-zeliwna-pod-piec-kaflowy-kominek-blacha-CID767-IDKHqiR.html#4d5b1522db> (accessed 19.10.2021); “Szafka szafeczka wisząca pozydowska” <https://www.olx.pl/d/oferta/szafka-szafeczka-wiszaca-pozydowska-CID628-IDK0gs1.html#19c3617522> (accessed 18.08.2021).
7. On the dispossession of Jews in France, see: Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words” *American Historical Review* (2005): 1015-45; Leora Auslander, “Coming Home? Jews in Postwar Paris” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40, 2 (2005): 237-59. In Germany: Carolin Dorothee Lange “After They Left: Looted Jewish Apartments and the Private Perception of the Holocaust” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 34, 3 (2020) 431-449.
 8. Patrick Desbois and Paul A. Shapiro, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
 9. Dariusz Stola, “The Polish Debate on the Holocaust and the Restitution of Property,” in Martin Dean, Constantin Gosciler, and Philipp Ther, *Robbery and Restitution: The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2007, 241-42.
 10. Dean, *Robbing the Jews*, 174-75.
 11. Auslander, “Coming Home?” 240.
 12. Ibid., 239.
 13. Wylegała, “About Jewish Things,” 100.
 14. Wylegała, *ibid.*, 117; Dean, *Robbing the Jews*, 174.
 15. Shallcross, *The Holocaust Object*, 3.
 16. *ibid.*, 3-4.
 17. Lange “After They Left.”
 18. Zuzanna Dziuban, “Dark Facets of ‘Appropriation’: Grave Robbery at a Nazi Extermination Camp in Poland,” in: *Dispossession: Plundering German Jewry*, edited by Christoph Kreutzmüller and Jonathan R. Zatin, 332-54, here 348.
 19. Stola, “The Polish Debate on the Holocaust,” 251.
 20. Such a definition of war-time and post-war plunder is offered by Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga: Polska 1944-1947*, Kraków: Znak, 2012, 293. Dziuban challenges this approach, postulating to see plunder as a relationship between people. “Dark Facets of ‘Appropriation’,” 338.
 21. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 18.
 22. Auslander, “Coming Home?” 239.
 23. Ibid.
 24. Ibid., 238.
 25. Auslander, “Beyond Words,” 1016.
 26. Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, London: Sage, 2012, 178.
 27. Fraser and Greco, *The Body: A Reader*, London: Routledge, 2005, 9.
 28. Susan M. Watkins, *Clothing: The Portable Environment*, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995, xv.
 29. Norbert Elias, cited in Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 178.
 30. Maurice Merleau-Ponty “The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology” in Fraser and Greco, *The Body: A Reader*, 52-54 here 53.
 31. Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 204.
 32. Auslander, “Beyond Words,” 1019-1020.
 33. Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*, 3.
 34. Igor Kopytoff “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 64-91.
 35. Arjun Appadurai “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value” in *The Social Life of Things*, 16.
 36. See: Łukasz Baksik, *Matzevot for Everyday Use*, Wołowiec: Czarne, 2012.
 37. Aleksium, *Dokąd dalej?*, 60.
 38. Sources for the statistical data: Shmuel Spector (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*, Jerusalem, 2001.

39. Jeffrey Shandler, *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014, 44.
40. Polonsky, Antony. "Introduction: The Shtetl: Myth and Reality," *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 17, *The Shtetl: Myth and Reality*, ed. by Antony Polonsky, 3-23, Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004, 14.
41. Marceli Najder, *Rewanż*, Warszawa: Ośrodek Karta, 2013, 228.
42. Luchfeld, VHA.
43. Sylvia Prypstein (born Hechtman), oral history interview from the Collection of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, January 23, 1997.
44. Philip Bialowitz, oral history interview from the Collection of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, August 22, 1997; Thomas Blatt, oral history interview from the Collection of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, April 4, 1995.
45. Boruch Wermut "Przeżyłem, aby dokonać zemsty" in *Zagłada Biłgoraja: Księga Pamięci*, Gdańsk: Słowo Obraz Terytoria, 2009, 205-211 here 210-211.
46. Wermut "Przeżyłem, aby dokonać zemsty," 210-211; "Protokół przesłuchania świadka, Biłgoraj 10.10.1945," IPN LU 327/31, part 1, 29.
47. Boruch Wermut "Protokół przesłuchania świadka, 18.09.1946 w Krakowie," IPN LU 327/31, part 1, 121.
48. "Protokół przesłuchania świadka, 16.05.1946, w Krakowie, Lejzer Fruchtländer, cholewkarz, l. 32," IPN LU 327/31, part 1, 56-57, here 57.
49. Auslander, "Beyond Words," 1020.
50. For multiple examples of the postwar misuse of Jewish gravestones, Torah scrolls, prayer shawls, and books see: Mordechaj Canin: *Przez ruiny i zgłiszczca: Podróż po stu zgładzonych gminach żydowskich w Polsce*, Warszawa: Nisza, 2018, 112, 180, 194, 371.
51. Mordechaj Rapaport, "Wizyta w moim miasteczku" in *Zagłada Biłgoraja*, 106-108 here 108. Translation: Magdalena Waligórska.
52. Chaim Itzkovitz, oral history interview from the Collection of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, April 6, 1997.
53. Prokopenko Ludmila, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 21.05.2021.
54. Rachel Luchfeld, VHA.
55. Tamara Baradach, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligórska and Ina Sorkina, 19.05.2021.
56. Leon Segal, *Tears of a Hero: The Amazing Story of Rubin and Ida Segal*, Leon Segal, 2005, 59.
57. Baradach, 19.05.2021
58. Viktor Sakel, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 03.01.2021 and 21.05.2021.
59. Siarhej Chura, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 22.05.2021.
60. Ivan Bujko, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 3.07. 2021.
61. Lidija Koščar, phone interview with Ina Sorkina, 15.10.2020.
62. Tamara Baradach, phone interview with Ina Sorkina, July 8, 2020. The same story survived also in the Jewish accounts in the Iuje diaspora. See: Leon Segal, *Tears of a Hero: The Amazing Story of Rubin and Ida Segal*, 2005, 53; Kaganowicz, *Ivie Memorial Book*, 631.
63. Ivan Bujko, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 3.07.2021. A similar image emerges from the recent research in Polish former shtetls. See: Mirosław Tryczyk, *Drzazga: Kłamstwa silniejsze niż śmierć*, Kraków: Znak, 2020.
64. Tamara Baradach, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15.10.2020.
65. Lidija Koščar, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15.10.2020.
66. Viktor Sakel in Boris Maftsir, outtakes from *Guardians of Remembrance: Searching for the Unknown Holocaust*, Ruth Diskin Films, 2014. Courtesy of Boris Maftsir.
67. See: "Dom" <https://macocha.org/dom> (accessed 26.08.2021).
68. Sviatlana Mirončyk, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15.06.2021.
69. Bujko, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 3.07.2021.
70. Sergey Chura, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 22.05.2021.
71. Marta Duch Dyngosz, "Jewish Objects in the Postwar Non-Jewish Households: Confronting the Local Communities in the Aftermath of Mass Plunder" paper presented at the GEOP

- Workshop "After the Void: New Perspective on the Shtetl in the Postwar Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands, 14-15 July 2021.
72. See for example an online add of "Jewish silverware" <https://www.olx.pl/d/oferta/srebrne-sztucce-do-ryb-judaica-CID767-IDIqbA3.html#b53abd820d> (accessed 19.10.2021); or "Jewish wardrobe" <https://www.olx.pl/d/oferta/piekna-stara-szafa-w-stylu-gdanskim-judaica-warszawa-CID628-IDub9FB.html#aflf832ea5> (accessed 19.10.2021).
 73. Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligowska, 30.06.2020.
 74. Artur Bara, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligowska, July 15, 2020.
 75. Dalia Bar, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligowska, 25.08.2020.
 76. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 5-6.
 77. Kopytoff "The Cultural Biography of Things," 64.
 78. See: Dziuban, "Dark Facets of 'Appropriation'," 332-34; Lange "After They Left," 437-38.
 79. Tamara Baradach, interview with Ina Sorkina, 19.05.2021.
 80. Katarzyna Weintraub, "Karp pożydowski," *Pogranicza. Szczeciński Dwumiesięcznik Kulturowy*, no 4, (2003), 41.
 81. Lena Bondar, phone interview with Ina Sorkina, 13.06.2021 and 27.06.2021.
 82. Morris Rapaport, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligowska, 17.03.2021.
 83. Ivan Bujko, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 3.07.2021.
 84. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory" *Poetics Today* 29, 1: 2008, 124.
 85. David Engel, "Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944-1946," *Yad Vashem Studies* 26 (1998): 43-85; Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006; Andrzej Żbikowski, "Morderstwa popełniane na Żydach w pierwszych latach po wojnie," in Tych and Grabowska, *Następstwa Zagłady*, 79; Dariusz Libionka, "Losy Chaima Hirszman jako przyczynek do refleksji nad pamięcią o Zagładzie i powojennymi stosunkami polsko-żydowskimi," *Polska 1944/45-1989: Studia i Materiały*, vol. 7, 2006: 5-24; Natalia Aleksium, "Jewish Responses to Antisemitism in Poland," in Joshua Zimmerman (ed.), *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003, 247-61; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Cries of the Mob in the Pogroms in Rzeszów (June 1945), Cracow (August 1945), and Kielce (July 1946) as a Source for the State of Mind of the Participants," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 553-74; Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944-48*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą: Społeczny portret Pogromu Kieleckiego*, Warsaw: Czarna Owca, 2018.
 86. Leonid Smilovitskiy, *Yevrei Belarusi: do i posle Kholokosta: Sbornik izbrannykh statey*, Iyerusalim: Noy, 2020, 123; Leonid Smilovitskiy, "The Struggle of Belorussian Jews for the Restitution of Possessions and Housing in the First Postwar Decade," *East European Jewish Affairs* 30, 2 (2000): 53-70; Franziska Exeler, "What Did You Do during the War? Personal Responses to the Aftermath of Nazi Occupation," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 17 (2016): 805-35; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Annexation, Evacuation, and Antisemitism in the Soviet Union, 1939-1946" In *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, edited by Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Atina Grossmann, 133-160. Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2017.
 87. The idea of relic-like quality of Holocaust victims' clothes and their function as "textile archives" that "embody the horrors" of the Holocaust comes from Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*, 3 and 26.
 88. Leora Auslander calls for more engagement with artefacts as sources for historians in "Beyond Words," 1017.
 89. Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*, 107 and 105.
 90. Morris and Adam Rapaport, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligowska, 17.03.2021; Mourice Wermut, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligowska, 9.03.2021.
 91. Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject, Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 9.
 92. Ibid., 1

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge support by the Open Access Publication Fund of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. The research was completed during Magdalena Waligórska's fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Study in Berlin.

Notes on contributors

Magdalena Waligórska is a cultural historian and sociologist. Her fields of interest include: contemporary Polish and Belarusian history, nationalism and national symbols, Jewish heritage and popular culture, Jewish/non-Jewish relations, music and identity, and memory studies. She is currently leading a research group at the Center for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage at the Humboldt University in Berlin. She has published extensively on Jewish culture, Jewish-non-Jewish relations and nationalism, among others, in: *East European Politics and Societies*, *Holocaust Studies*, *East European Jewish Affairs* and *Jewish Cultural Studies*. Her first book, *Klezmer's Afterlife: An Ethnography of the Jewish Music Revival in Poland and Germany*, appeared with Oxford University Press in 2013.

Ina Sorkina is a historian of Belarus, particularly the Grodno region. Jewish history and shtetl history are her main fields of expertise. She holds a PhD from the Belarusian Academy of Sciences in Minsk (1998). She has authored, among others, *Mjastechki of Belarus at the End of 18th – First Half of 19th Century* (Vilnius, EHU, 2010). She has also led multiple field expeditions in Belarus in cooperation with Warsaw's POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and Jewish Historical Institute. She is currently a co-investigator in the project: 'Mapping the Archipelago of Lost Towns: Post-Holocaust Urban Lacunae in the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands' (Gerda Henkel Foundation, 2020-2023).

ORCID

Magdalena Waligórska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7856-0831>