SCRIPTA JUDAICA CRACOVIENSIA
Vol. 15 (2017) pp. 141–152
doi:10.4467/20843925SJ.17.010.8179
www.ejournals.eu/Scripta-Judaica-Cracoviensia

Of Love and War: Poles and Jews in Rutu Modan's *The Property*

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Key words: cultural stereotypes, irony, Polish-Jewish relations

Abstract: Stereotypes may be reductive and emotionally charged but, as shared inter-group perceptions, they are an integral part of any social interaction, especially in the history of neighboring groups such as Jews and Poles. Rutu Modan's graphic novel *The Property* (2013) offers a broad range of stereotypical behaviors, characterizations, and attitudes which have informed the relationship between the two groups. The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of Polish-Jewish relations through the trope of the stereotype, revealing its persistence and ubiquity in both nations' cultural milieus. The focus of the discussion will be on humor and irony as key discursive tools which, it will be argued, challenge the validity of stereotypes by breaking their polarity and opening up new avenues of communication. A stereotype-driven narrative, which challenges the past and invites re-readings of Holocaust discourse, facilitates cross-cultural awareness since stereotypes work both ways, revealing not only one's prejudiced perspective of other groups, but also the perceiver's character.

Rutu Modan's 2013 comic book *The Property* tells the story of an elderly Israeli lady, Regina Segal, who decides to take her granddaughter Mica to Warsaw on the pretext of reclaiming a family property lost during the Second World War. As Mica soon realises, Regina has other motives for returning to her former home that have to do with her recently deceased father, Reuben, and her grandmother's life left behind long ago in Poland. Regina's reasons for returning to Warsaw over fifty years after leaving it as a young, pregnant woman sent off to Palestine to have her baby are slowly revealed and involve a young Polish boy named Roman Górski. Similar to Art Spiegeman's *Maus* (1986), where there are two separate narrative strands representing the "*then* of father's Holocaust story and the *now* of the narration of that story" (McGlothlin 2003: 179), in Modan's comic project there is the *now* of the journey to Poland and the *then* of Regina's past, though unlike in *Maus*, there is no temporal blurring of the two.

This paper will explore the nature of Polish-Jewish relations through the trope of stereotype, revealing the persistence and ubiquity of the cultural stereotypes which have informed the relationship between the two groups. Through close reading of Modan's graphic novel, I will highlight humor and irony as key discursive instruments which challenge the validity of stereotypes by breaking their polarity and opening up new avenues of communication. The stereotype-driven humor is also used in the novel to talk

about the lasting effects of World War II trauma, confronting the past and challenging Holocaust discourse. As stereotypes may function on diverse levels, my focus is on their representation and the ways in which their destabilization and relativization allow for a counter-discourse to appear. Lippmann's (1922) basic definition of stereotypes as "pictures in our heads" (3) lends itself well to my discussion of the graphic novel. However, a more recent psycho-sociological definition proposed by Bartmiński (2009) focuses on those elements of the characteristic that reinforce prejudice and stipulate the barriers in communication, especially in view of hetero-stereotypes (the perception of others) and the history of neighboring groups, Jews and Poles in the case of this article. They may be simplified and emotionally charged, yet, as shared inter-group perceptions, stereotypes are an integral part of any social interaction, serving various purposes, such as being "aids to explanation ... [as well as] energy saving devices" (McGarty, Yzerbyt, Spears 2002: 2). It is worth noting that stereotypes work both ways, revealing not only one's prejudiced perspective on other groups but also the perceiver's character, hence they facilitate cross-cultural awareness.

Following LaCapra's distinction between history, as transcending the boundaries of a single viewpoint, and memory, as pertaining to a first-person witnessing of a set of events that is characterized by the witness's personal feelings and experiences (LaCapra 1996: 20-21), we can observe how in Modan's graphic novel both representations of the past inform and challenge each other. *The Property* combines the memory of World War II with family secrets and a complicated cross-ethnic love story, demonstrating how the war continues to echo down through the years and wields its influence on family relationships across generations. Victoria Elmwood observes that "[w]hile private narratives certainly inform the historical record, they are also important in the extent to which they differ from it in content and scale, reminding us of the roles that individuals play in large-scale historical trends or events" (Elmwood 2004: 717). Despite its specific context of family history, *The Property* offers an examination of intergenerational family relationships that maintains a high degree of universality. Modan's graphic novel provides an interesting insight into contemporary Polish-Jewish relations, which are tainted by the memory of war. It portrays Jews who lived in Poland before the war and those who live in present-day Israel, showing how the traumatic memory of loss has shaped their perception of Poland. Allowing the Jewish protagonist to re-visit Poland, the author demonstrates prejudices and stereotypes that persist in both nations but resists reductionism by showing their complexity. In an interview, the author explains her interest in Poland:

> When I went to Poland, I think my biggest surprise as an Israeli was to find out the Polish have a very different story about the past from what I was taught. I was taught a narrative about what happened in the war to the Jews, and how Poles are. When I meet young Germans, I think we have more or less the same story. There is general agreement about who are the good guys who are the bad guys, what happened when, and from that point it's very easy to find we have the same story and we can make peace. With the Poles, I had this feeling all the time that I wanted to tell them what really happened, but I understood that I can't. Their story, for them, was true, just like mine. We have to accept that they have a different narrative. Israelis and the Palestinians have that problem. We don't share the same narrative about the past. It's really difficult to make peace when we are still arguing about the story—about which story is the best story or the more accurate story. (Dueben 2013)

Thus, Modan's graphic novel is an attempt to explore the differences in respective nations' interpretations of history in order to make sense of their roots and to find common ground for further dialogue. It is also a voice of the next generation of young Israelis for whom Poland is only a distant and alien place from their grandparents' stories, which are inevitably emotionally affected by the trauma of the Holocaust. A visit to Poland is an occasion not only to confront the past but also to forge one's own opinion about the country, which once was both home to one of the largest and most significant Jewish diasporic communities in the world and the tragic place of the Shoah.

The author employs the use of Hergé's pioneering artistic style, which sets distinctive yet simplistic cartoon figures against detailed and vivid backgrounds. "The signature style Hergé became renowned for was called *ligne claire* (French for 'clear line'), where every line of the drawing was given exceptional clarity with a minimum of shadow" (Petersen 2011: 215). Modan's elegant and clear lines stand in opposition to the ambiguous and shadowy storyline, illuminating its hybrid visual-verbal nature. The panels are rectangular, of a similar size and shape on each page, and are drawn in full color. The artist uses a different color palette for panels not only to signal a change of mood but also to indicate changes of time and place. "Graphic novels employ cinematic conventions: long shots establish setting and mood, characters' emotions are communicated using close-ups, and changing camera angles convey power relations between readers and represented characters and objects" (Connors 2012: 34). The gutters (i.e., the spaces between the panels) are even and facilitate the linear reading across the sequences of images. When the panels are widened, they draw the reader's attention to important moments in the story, for example when Avram begins to sing on Zaduszki (the Polish celebration of All Souls' Day) (203),[1] or when Regina sees her old apartment building (49). The realistic drawing style equally combines text with images, without privileging one over the other. Warsaw streets and landmarks, such as the Palace of Culture and Science and Warsaw Fotoplastikon, are faithfully depicted, giving the story a feel of authenticity.

There is no narrator, as the story mainly consists of a dialogue that reveals three different narrative lines: Regina's pre-war Polish love affair and its consequences, the reclamation of the property, and the Siegel's family dynamics, with Warsaw and Poles serving as the background to the main plotlines. The story is told without any commentary by the author, which gives the narrative testimonial emotional impact and leaves space for the readers to fill in. The text and images function as "a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader," to use Wolfgang Iser's words (1978: 9). The speech balloons are filled with English words (translation from Hebrew by Jessica Cohen); when Polish is used, the lines are unreadable and remain obscure to all readers. The bubbles are neutral in nature: filled with black text on a white background and written in straight horizontal lines: "In this way, the bubble was intended as a 'parallel' device to the figurative drawing of the panel" (Rippl, Etter 2013: 207). The characters' inner thoughts and feelings are not stated explicitly; instead, readers are confronted with their facial expressions, such as Regina's horror and awe at finding the name of her lover in the Warsaw phone book (20). It is not only Regina's face that readers see, but also her shock, bewilderment, and pain

[1] R. Modan, *The Property*, trans. J. Cohen, New York: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013. All references are to this edition and are cited by page within the text.

at the discovery. Facial close-ups have the effect of bringing the reader into the story, closer to the authentic experience of human encounters, in which only some ideas are articulated, and the rest can be inferred by body language, as well as gaps and omissions.

Poles and Jews in stereotypes

Modan's narrative portrays both Polish and Jewish characters who exhibit traits that are commonly identified as stereotypical, whereas the realistic visual rendition gives them the semblance of authenticity. Regina impressions represent a popular Israeli Holocaust survivor's view of Poland, which rejects any concern for this land: "I couldn't care less about Warsaw. It's one big cemetery / I don't want any business dealings with the Poles" (21). Such a harsh and limited vision of Poland is passed on to the next generation, represented in the story by her granddaughter Mica, who repeats after her grandmother, "After all, everything here burned down and everyone died" (95). Regina does not trust Poles: "I know these people. I grew up with them" (85) and refuses to countenance any possibility of reconciliation: "she would never give the Poles the satisfaction of thinking she'd forgiven them, just for the money" (35). Her biased view of Poland is revealed when she makes speculative generalizations about Tomasz's father, whom she has never met: "For all I know, his grandfather slaughtered Jews" (86), but who by virtue of being Polish conforms to her critical view of Poland and Polish people. The illustrations do not simply restate the text, but support it by adding a depth of information: Regina's depiction and her body language signal a strong-minded and obstinate person, yet some of this determination is exaggerated, as it hides her nervousness and unease resulting from revisiting her youth. Bossing Mica around, she masks her own anxiety about meeting her former lover and passing on the sad news.

The representation of Poland as the land of the Holocaust, Auschwitz, and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is continued through the introduction of the Israeli youth, who come to Poland to visit the historical sites connected with the Shoah. The panels showing young people on the plane heading to Poland display typical adolescent, care-free behaviour: they shout and laugh loudly, take selfies, argue, fight, and kiss. In principle, their trip is to concentrate on the extermination of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, focusing on the death camps and the former areas of the ghettos—places which have been selected with a view to providing an educational and emotional experience for the students. These young people, however, fail to acknowledge the seriousness and gravity of the journey's purpose, and see the trip to Poland as similar to any other school excursion: "Let's see... Monday... Treblinka, Tuesday... Majdanek, gas chambers, etc. The girl behind: Yey! (excited)" (10). The Israeli tour guide does not help to temper their mood to a more solemn one since he himself evaluates the historical sites according to the degree of horror they instigate in visitors: "Personally, I prefer Majdanek to Auschwitz. It's much scarier" (10). The symbolic places commemorating the World War II atrocities have become tourist attractions, to be approached in a similar way to any other places of tourist interest. During their sightseeing tour, the young Israeli visitors ignore present-day Poland and its history after the Holocaust. Modan demonstrates how Poland is employed as a pedagogical instrument in the formation of Jewish identity for young

Israelis, the most important part of which is a trip to the Holocaust sites.[2] The panel showing the same group of youths on their way back to Israel testifies to the appropriateness of the history lesson, which they have just learned: they sit quietly engrossed in their own thoughts, one cries, and one reads Anne Frank's diary. "The kids are so peaceful, the trip to Poland had a good effect on them," (220) notices Regina.

From the Jewish perspective, the educational effect seems to have been achieved, and the young people go home with a heightened awareness of the Holocaust. The biased vision of Poland as one, big Jewish graveyard, however, not only prevents the initiation of a constructive dialogue between the two groups, but also neglects the post-war existence of a Jewish community in Poland. What the young people get is a very reductive picture of Jewish-Polish relations in the form of a fragmented history, a history which in fact is so much longer and more complicated. A visit which might have been a good opportunity to promote dialogue, understanding, and encouragement for the next generations to think about our complex histories, antisemitism, and tolerance toward minorities, leaves both groups equally ignorant of each other. Had it happened, such an encounter might have served as a platform for dialogue, which could help overcome negative stereotypes and counter prejudice.

Modan draws her characters with attention to detail, rendering realistic[3] portraits of real people, though the stereotyping does not involve bodily features that might be associated with being Jewish.[4] Hence, she constructs an experimental reality that escapes immediate stereotyping. Only by combining the portrayal of her characters with the dialogue does the author present the whole inventory of the common intergroup Jewish stereotypes, such as that of their clannishness (Avram to Mica: "Your father would have wanted someone to make sure you stick with your kind" (100)), and vindictiveness ("The only thing Jews like more than money is spite" (219)). Jewish boastfulness reflects, in Modan's own words, "the pathetic and doomed-to-failure ways that people are trying to remember the past, or to bring it back, or correct it after the fact" (Sobel 2013). "Back in Poznań half the factories belonged to my great-uncle"... "**My** father was the manager of a **very** successful factory" ... "My mother is a descendant of the famous rabbinical judge, the sage of Susnovitz" [and] "**My** family were rabbinical judges for generations" (16) [bold in the original]. Jewish fondness for money reappears in the story on many levels, prompting a dispute within and across national lines. Since Regina is oblivious to the secretive arrangement behind the sale of her parents' apartment, she does not know the real reasons why Roman still lives there, yet she assumes her parents must have been cheated out of it. She evinces the common belief that Poles jumped at the opportunity, illegally obtained the property, and would not give it back to the legal owners. On the other hand, Regina's visit to Poland reinforces the conviction that Jews come to Poland only for financial reasons, namely to get back their property at all costs. The motif of money returns when conniving Avram is sent by Regina's daughter to watch the possible retrieval of the property, and when he tries to bribe Roman, giving him $1000 so that he

[2] For a discussion see: Soen, Davidovitch 2011: 5-27.

[3] Modan used actors to act out every panel in the book and drew from that.

[4] For more information see Chapter III "The Female Body in the American Jewish Literary Imagination" in my book *Stereotyped, Spirited, and Embodied: Representations of Women in American Jewish Fiction* (2015): 145-220.

will not cooperate with Regina and Mica. Whether it is the means by which they reach their goals or the end in itself, the stereotypical motif of money plays an important part in the characterization of the Jewish characters.

By the same token, readers of Modan's pictorial narrative are presented with Polish characters who exhibit many different types of stereotypical behavior. They are untrustworthy: "I know these people. I grew up with them," (85) says Regina, adding "I don't want any business dealings with the Poles. [The lawyer] will cheat me and steal my money" (21), and uneducated: "Lawyers in Poland don't speak English" (33). An equally critical opinion is expressed about the Polish judicial system: "It takes years to get a piece of property from the Poles" (124). The reciprocal nature of distrust is seen when Regina swears that "she would never give the Poles the satisfaction of thinking she'd forgiven them, just for the money" (35). When Mica quarrels with Tomasz and wants him out of her hotel room, she uses the word "antisemite" to make him leave. Yet, the same historically and culturally loaded word is used by a Polish passer-by to Regina, when she interrupts Avram's singing on Zaduszki. The author constantly unsettles common associations by presenting them from different perspectives, thus inviting readers to rethink their own positions on these issues. Other common associations with Poles involve drinking vodka, eating pierogi, and smoking cigarettes.

To counter the communicative void, present-day Poland displays a renewed interest in things Jewish: Avram Yagodnim is travelling to a cantors' convention in Poland, there are Jewish history tours, a Society for Jewish Memorialization re-enacts life in the ghetto, and there is a desire to do more: "My dream is to rebuild one of the Ghetto streets" (163), says one of the Polish activists. Contrary to Regina's predominantly negative view, contemporary Polish opinion about the Jews defies any antisemitic accusations and is overwhelmingly positive: "People like you are exactly what the Polish economy needs: smart, industrious, family people" (66). Equally flattering, if not a little humorous, is the image of the present-day Israeli armed forces, who use military Krav Maga: "I once saw a story on TV about female soldiers in Israel. They stood in rows and strangled snakes with their bare hands" (60). Poles are presented as open-minded and unbiased, even though they most probably have not had much, if any, contact with Jews. Hence, their knowledge is largely whatever is left of the past Polish-Jewish relations and not a result of real familiarity between the two groups. The unbiased Polish response to Jewishness, which seems to be filtered through the lens of political correctness and general platitudes, offers a stark contrast to Regina's anti-Polonism. An inevitable feeling of irony links both positions, at the same time undermining their viability. Just as Thomas Doherty finds Art Spiegelman's portrayal of the figure of the father in *Maus* to defy "the stereotype of the Holocaust survivor. Neither saintly sufferer nor guilt-ravaged witness" (Doherty 1996: 81), in Modan's satirical characterization, not all Jews are excessively anti-Polish, nor are all Poles anti-Semitic. By grouping the two nations in competing sets, the author uses binary opposition to show the shallowness of such generalization when dealing with human emotions. As the story unfolds, the truth reveals itself to be more complicated than what can be defined in simplistic binary terms.

Regina as the Jewish mother

One of the most popular intra-group characterizations is represented by Regina Segal, who is portrayed as a stereotypical Jewish mother;[5] this tough, unpleasant, old woman, the type that is called in the United States "Yiddishe Mama" and in Israel "a Polish lady." She is depicted as an elegant, elderly woman, with a neat hairdo and tasteful makeup. Smart clothes and subtle jewellery complete the image of Regina as a stylish woman. At the same time, she is manipulative, confusing, and her narrative refuses to shy away from awkward misunderstandings and cross-purpose communication. At the airport, she refuses to part with a bottle of water and drinks it while keeping everybody in line waiting: "I'm an old woman! Do you want me to get dehydrated?" (7). On the plane, she instructs the airhostess: "You can use my meal for the next flight. I haven't touched it" (18), and she lies to Mica: "How could you do that to me... I didn't sleep all night! Do you know how dangerous that is for a woman my age? — Mica: You were fast asleep when I came..." (103). She is thrifty, "It's very expensive to talk on the cell phone overseas" (52), observant: "When I buy clothes, the first thing I do is look at the hem stitching. To make sure it's straight. That's how you check the workmanship" (80), and judgmental (criticizing her friend's hotel recommendation in Warsaw): "That woman never had any class" (19). Mica uses common associations with this stock character to explain to Tomasz how to win her grandmother's favor: "Don't delude yourself! You're not 'fun undzere,' and you can only be 'one of us' if you're a Jewish doctor who's nice to his mother" (93).

The panels show how Regina manipulates her audience: she either appears to be a victim of circumstance—a poor, elderly lady with downcast eyes and a helpless expression—or an overbearing and demanding tyrant who knows exactly what she wants, directing her stern and accusing look straight into her opponent's eyes. In the former case, she is depicted smaller and set at a distance from other characters; in the latter, she is bigger as she takes centre stage in the panel. A sequence of wordless panels, in which Regina's facial expressions take on a somewhat cartoonish quality, shows how the haughtiness, which has so far defined her character, crumbles into shock. This is when she finds her former lover's name and address still in the telephone book—when her memories are confronted with this reality, she becomes speechless. The stillness, which is in contrast to her usual domineering self, leaves space for questions about the complex nature of repressed memories and their influence on the human psyche.

Regina's characterization conforms to what "has become a universally recognized metaphor for emotional harassment (53), and the embodiment of what non-Jews viewed as the worst traits connected with ethnic identity" (Gasztold 2015: 58). Even though she runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypes, the extensive use of this concept in Modan's narrative initially evokes familiar imagery, making the text more accessible to readers. The combination of positive and negative traits, however, defies the simplicity of social categorization. The familiar becomes a critical springboard for fresh associations about the two groups, inviting readers to re-assess their opinions, whether they are expressions of a collective experience or an assertion of a personal belief.

[5] For a discussion about the Jewish mother stereotype see Chapter 1.5 "The Jewish Mother" in my book *Stereotyped, Spirited, and Embodied: Representations of Women in American Jewish Fiction* (2015): 47-62.

The Holocaust imagery

Having immigrated to Israel right before the outbreak of the Second World War, Regina is divorced from the horrors that confronted other Polish Jews and their families. The reality of the Holocaust is always there, as the story's backdrop, but it is never given center stage. Black and white panels mirror Regina's memories of pre-war Warsaw streets, with Jewish passers-by, pushcarts, and balloon vendors, signaling a world that is gone, while the colored panels depict present day Warsaw, which conforms to the representation of any big European metropolis. War trauma is looming in the background through imagery: the ghetto re-enactment with the German soldiers in uniforms, swastikas and machine guns in their hands, the lorries into which the pedestrians are herded, a yellow Star of David badge with the word 'Jude', Regina's memory of pre-war Warsaw—the cemetery being the only place that still looks like she remembered it, Tomasz's sketches of the Warsaw Uprising, Roman's recollections of his best friend being shot in the street, a Zaduszki day on which Holocaust victims are remembered, and the cantor singing the Jewish funeral prayer.

Along with this imagery, we can see how the war trauma affects family relationships, which are portrayed as deeply distorted. Regina's family's past is ridden with secrets and lies, so the communication between grandmother and granddaughter is largely informed by omissions, half-truths, and falsehoods. Regina's daughter, Tzilla, accuses her mother of favouring her son, Reuben, over her, and that is why she sends her boyfriend, Avram Yagodnik, to keep a close eye on her mother and niece. The avoidance of the physical impact of war does not prevent its aftermath from disrupting family relationships, which suffer from emotional estrangement and the inability to tell the truth. Since the emotional impairments and conflicts are not worked through, the distress and silencing upholds the emotional blocking. Therefore, Regina's trip to Poland has a cathartic effect not only on her but also on her family: with secrets revealed and lies debunked, there is the possibility of a happier future. Relieving emotional pressure, they can mentally free themselves to see their problems in a new perspective and engage in clearer decision-making.

Modan's inversion of the post-Holocaust journey convention is illuminated toward the end, when Regina, Mica, Avram, and Mica's Polish (boy)friend, Tomasz, are at a crowded cemetery for Zaduszki. In the midst of everyone honoring the dead, and to divert attention from spying on Mica and Tomasz, Avram begins chanting a Jewish funeral prayer—he is a cantor, after all—that is often sung throughout Israel at Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies. What at first could be read as an act of Jewish re-appropriation becomes a misguided and, to some degree, comic attempt at ethnic affirmation. Regina hits Avram with her bag in mid-prayer, and then they all quarrel about who should inherit the Warsaw property. Regina calls Avram out for what he really is: another false claimant to her property, her story, and her memory. Thus, Avram Yagodnik represents the post-Holocaust awareness of the Jewish identity: he is actually traveling to Warsaw for ostensibly the same reason as Regina and Mica, to recover the family's property, but he does so clandestinely and wants to stake his own claim. His depiction throughout the novel adds to the deviousness of his character: he is pictured as an overweight and shabby, middle-aged man with an excess of body hair that he likes to exhibit, and he wears the same blue shirt throughout the seven-day trip with morsels

of food lining the pockets. He is pictured as hiding behind a flowerpot eavesdropping on Regina and Mica (30) and meddling in family affairs to antagonize them: "I always say: divide and conquer!" (129). He scares Roman: "All [the old lady] is after is revenge. She'll throw you out without any calms" (173), sneaks up on Mica and Tomasz; "I just happened to be here" (202), and reports back to Tzilla on the progress of their plot. His facial expressions convey cunningness and sneakiness, stirring in the reader feelings of treachery and unease. Avram's destructive behavior, the absence of any traumatic flashbacks—the only Nazis in his story are the harmless performers recreating Ghetto scenes for the city's Society for Jewish Memorialization—and the avoidance of allusions to Polish anti-Semitism suggest a deeply ironic and nuanced kind of post-Holocaust narrative.

A comedy of errors

Through a satirical veneer of humor and comedy, Modan presents a provocative social commentary on Polish-Jewish relations. There is plenty of mutual suspicion in the stereotyped interactions between Poles and Jews, but the author manages to avoid reductivism by highlighting the complexity of the stories and adding to them a large dose of humor. A serious and tragic topic is balanced by a comedy of errors, which brings to light the disparity between the reality and its perception, between the way things are and the different ways in which the characters see them. The titular *Property* and retrieving the Jewish property lost in the war, which was impossible under the Communist regime, constitutes one of the main storylines in Modan's narrative. It is vital to provide historical context, without which it would not be possible to understand all the historical and cultural nuances. In October 1940, when the Nazis ordered all the Jews to the ghetto, they confiscated their apartments and gave them to collaborators. Regina's Polish boyfriend, Roman, arrives at a solution, suggesting that her parents should sell him the property since under Polish ownership it would be safe. When the war is over, Roman will give the property back. In the meantime, he is not to contact Regina, who is sent to Palestine to have their baby. Both parties sign a contract in which Roman would obtain Regina's address on giving back the apartment. As they are privy only to parts of the arrangement, Roman thinks that Regina has come back to Poland just for the money, when in fact she has come to tell him about the death of their son, Reuben. Their stereotypical responses reflect a mutual distrust and show a biased approach that shapes their encounters: Poles assume that Jews come to Poland only for financial reasons, namely to get back their property, whereas Jews assume that Poles illegally obtained the property and will not give it back. The author, however, challenges this line of thought by adding a family twist to it, as the possibility of an inheritance titillates the imagination of other members of the Segal family: "Tzilla thinks you're planning to give the whole property to Mica and that she won't get anything" (206). The juxtaposition of a serious topic with a home-grown family drama allows Modan to present the importance of moral integrity across nationalities and generations. This complicated history, abundant in unresolved issues, generates and suppresses tensions that breed remoteness and alienation. That is why the ending places a higher value on finding out the truth that helps the characters reconcile with the past and allows a hopeful look into the future.

Humorous touches balance the grim story about the loss of love, loved ones, youth, and a trip to a world that no longer exists. In order to avoid her granddaughter's prying eyes, Regina deliberately misleads Mica, telling her that their property was at 63 Grzybowska St., which in fact was the location of the cinema. When Mica finds the address, she realizes that it is now the site of the Warsaw Hilton. Fantasizing about a high payoff, the girl celebrates the discovery with a glass of champagne and a hope for restitution or compensation. A lack of knowledge about each other's history is the source of another misunderstanding: Mica confuses the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19 to May 16, 1943) with the Warsaw Uprising (August 1 to October 3, 1944). Tomasz is at work on a comic-book retelling of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, a subject of national pride, while Mica, like most Israelis, is only familiar with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. While visiting the ghetto, Tomasz assumes that since Mica is Jewish, she must be sad, but Mica's sadness is not caused by the area of the ghetto but by the fact that her father has died recently. During the re-enactment in the Warsaw ghetto, one of the participants accidentally tries to force Mica into a truck: "Stasz gets a little too excited," (161) explains the organizer. Once they get all the 'Jews' inside the car, they all go to... McDonald's. A Polish Philosemite from the Society for Jewish Memorialization expresses her vision: "And one day, we'll erase the Muranów district and rebuild the ghetto; I **really miss** the ghetto" (166) [bold in the original]. Numerous examples of humor and satire reduce the stress connected with the gravity of the subject matter and facilitate the ability to confront openly the controversial issues. The feeling of incongruity, which results from the humorous twists, disengages readers' emotions, allowing space to ponder the cognitive gap and, expectantly, reexamine one's beliefs. As a vehicle for critical thinking, humor allows a different avenue of communication that provides an arena for change, facilitated by a degree of immunity. Laughter is disarming, while also creating a safe and playful space for discussion: "The joker lightens the oppressiveness of social reality, demonstrates its arbitrariness, and expresses creative possibilities of the situation" (Rapaport 2005: 252). Making fun equally of both groups, the narrative illuminates the therapeutic benefits of humor through countering the negative power of stereotyping.

Conclusion

The Property is narrated through female voices—those of a grandmother (Regina) and granddaughter (Mica)—two generations of women who pass on traditions together with family secrets. Women protagonists, on the one hand, reflect the matrilineal descent in Judaism, which is traditionally a carrier of Jewishness, but on the other hand reject the narrow roles conferred on them as Jewish daughters. Modan gives a voice to women who were denied it, such as the pregnant Regina who is given no choice but to abandon her non-Jewish lover Roman Górski, marry a man of her father's choice, and leave for Palestine. What has been marginalized is brought to the center and given a privileged place in the story. Deciding to come back to Poland, yet willfully neglecting and manipulating the facts, Regina takes control of her life, presenting herself as autonomous and independent. As a symbolic reclamation of her past, the trip to Poland allows her to learn the truth and to reinstate her position as an agent of her life. Cracks, omissions, and deceptions in her narrative help her to imagine and manage the past, but also indicate a gap between the

past and the way it was experienced. It is this experience that is ultimately privileged but never quite accessed directly in the novel, since Modan's heroine is only able to make an authentic connection to the past by abjuring any claims to personal gain from it. History comes full circle when Regina recommends that Mica go to Sweden with Tomasz, just like young Regina and Roman were planning to elope to Sweden in May 1939. The sequence is a depiction of spring, with a young couple rowing a boat on the Vistula river, bright, cheerful colors, and trees in pink blossom conveying feelings of happiness and bliss, just like "sweet memories" (Sobel 2013) do. The last panel of the novel recalls this image and Roman's words: "They say Sweden in summertime is the most beautiful place in the world" (57, 222). Thus, the closing message is overly optimistic, suggesting that what was impossible for Regina's generation is still possible for Mica's.

Mica is also a survivor, not of the Holocaust, but mourning the recent loss of her father. Prior to this trip, she had already known that her father was the illegitimate son of a Polish goy, but this well-guarded family secret does not seem to bother her. Mica exemplifies the younger generation, who might still exhibit inherited stereotyped behavior towards the Poles, but who is open to new experiences, also of a romantic kind. Her Polish friend, Tomasz, represents through his art both the current condition of the former Warsaw ghetto and Poland's darker past. His sketchbook, which includes romantic encounters as well as drawings of German soldiers and Gestapo figures, echoes Regina and Roman's story that demonstrates how complicated cross-national love is during a time of war. Promoting a tolerance of ambiguity, graphic novels encourage readers to construct meaning outside of conventional, linear storytelling. Cromer observes that "[t]his process involves a devolution of the locus of authority over the text, with the reader assuming some of that authority previously reserved for the author alone" (Cromer 2007: 582).

Graphic novels, such as *The Property*, not only promote artistic sensibilities but also provide another way to access historical experience. By combining visual imagery with text, they appeal both to the expectations of contemporary consumers of a culture that is largely informed by visual effects and to a more engaging and demanding position of readers of literary texts. The fact that graphic novels can reach readers at various reading levels does not diminish their potential for attending to significant historical and cultural issues. "Literature generalizes human experience, while the events of [the] atrocity we call the Holocaust insist on their singularity" (Langer 1995: 77). Hence, the protagonist's re-immersion into her past serves as a pretext to show the dynamics of the Polish-Jewish bilateral relations in a historical context. The problems in the story are by no means localized to a single point of view but signal broader issues pertaining to cultural mediations of Holocaust memory and factuality. "The graphic novel is a site where 'history' itself, or representations of history, are put into play: interrogated, challenged and even undermined" (Frey, Noys 2002: 258). Presenting problematic issues across generations and nationalities, Modan demonstrates that the relationship to the past can fuel how we relate to each other in the present, both within the family and to the outside world. The use of the graphic novel format allows the author to present other perspectives on historical events that introduce counter-narratives, illuminating the experience of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relationships as informed by multiple and diverse sources. The reader, however, who is invited to identify the underlying ideological, historical, and cultural currents running through the text, is free to take up or contest the author's message.

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