

**LUCYNA ALEKSANDROWICZ-PĘDICH, *MEMORY AND NEIGHBORHOOD: POLES AND POLAND IN JEWISH AMERICAN FICTION AFTER WORLD WAR TWO*,
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Little has so far been written about the perception of Poland and Poles in American Jewish fiction. One could mention Thomas Gladsky's *Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves: Ethnicity in American Literature* (1992), and Danusha V. Goska's recent study: *Bieganski. The Brute Polak Stereotype: Its Role in Polish-Jewish Relations and American Popular Culture* (2010). Therefore Aleksandrowicz-Pędich's new book is an important addition to a research topic scarcely touched by other scholars. The author's aim is to use "fiction as a resource towards a better understanding of collective mentality" (9). The belief that literature is reflective of identity and ethnicity is an overarching thread guiding this project. Poland has only been an occasional focus of American fiction, but the emergence of ethnic literatures, especially written by prolific authors of Jewish descent, allowed a closer look at this distant country. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich's thorough and original study addresses a number of issues that demonstrate the complexity of Polish, Polish-Jewish, American-Jewish, and Israeli relations, in which historical facts often merge with common stereotypes. The study demonstrates how the concept of neighborhood applies both to the Old World and to America, with the sporadic presence of present-day Poles and Jews from Israel. Memory, being both persuasive and elusive, refers not only to recollections of an actual place called Poland, but also to certain customs, traditions, and practices, which are indicative of its presence in the American Jewish collective imagination.

The author limits the scope of her research to texts written after World War II, which leaves the whole inventory of pre-Holocaust texts out of her discussion. An examination of Yiddish literature, for example, might prove crucial to understanding of present-day biases, since many of the American Jewish authors, discussed in the book had been influenced greatly by Yiddish writers. What comes from the analysis is the representation of Poland as the land of death – one big Jewish cemetery. This distorted image is the result of many historical and social factors that had an influence on Polish-Jewish relations. For American Jewish authors the memory of the Holocaust is overwhelming when it comes to Poland, and virtually annihilates more than 700 years of Jewish presence on the Polish soil. The pre-Holocaust Jewish Poland, if mentioned at all, is merely the nostalgic site of lost childhood. The importance of a vibrant and thriving Jewish life in Poland and the contributions of many assimilated Jews to Polish culture are largely omitted. The viability of these negative connotations is reinforced by historical traumas such as the history of pogroms and anti-Semitic sentiments that manifested themselves in Eastern Europe. Since, in the common American imagination, Poland is hardly discernible from its neighbors such as Russia and Ukraine, the experience of Jewish persecutions refers to the whole of Eastern Europe. Hence, the predominantly negative memories used to

strengthen the reception of Poland as well as its portrayal as the site of Jewish extermination. The assimilative hardships of the Holocaust survivors who came to America showed that “[t]he Old World antagonisms survive into the New World” (60). Troubled relations with Polish neighbors corresponded with a largely unfavorable portrayal of Poland in literature, perpetuating negative generalizations, which were readily adopted by the next generations.

The author draws from and critically examines two works: Soshana Ronen’s *Polin. A Land of Forests and Rivers. Images of Poland and Poles in Contemporary Hebrew Literature in Israel* (2007) and Danusha V. Goska’s *Bieganski: The Brute Polak Stereotype, Its Role in Polish-Jewish Relations and American Popular Culture* (2010). In Goska’s study, she finds the choice of subject matter useful but its presentation controversial. She agrees, for example, with Goska’s characterization of the work of Leon Uris, who “manipulate[ed] history for his emotional and political purposes: exaggerating and strengthening Polish anti-Semitism” (32), and with the argument about the inappropriateness of teaching Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1997) in class since it lacks historical accuracy and perpetuates stereotypes: “the main risk involved in the use of *Maus* in teaching about the Holocaust and the Second World War is in its simplifying history and creating stereotypical evaluations, as *Maus* largely ignores the traumatic experiences of Poles in a country which was controlled by the German occupier in a way which not only deprived Poles of freedom and endangered their well-being, but was a constant threat to their lives” (95). The author also supports Goska’s argument about “cursed Poland” and its role in creating Jewish identity (100), and agrees that “[t]he negativity regarding Poland extended to Polish Jews in the eyes of Western European Jews, in immigrant communities in the United States or when Polish Jews emigrated to Western Europe (111). However, Aleksandrowicz-Pędich disagrees with Goska about the archetypal Bieganski, claiming that “none of the characters studied in this analysis pertain to this description” (65). Her study shows that Goska’s assumptions are oversimplified, as the problem is more complex and goes far beyond “strong, stupid, and violent.”

Another important critical work that serves as a springboard for the author’s discussion draws from Hebrew literature. One may observe similarities between American Jewish and Hebrew authors whose representations of Poland derive from the same Eastern European ancestry and who witnessed, literally or figuratively, the demise of the Polish-Jewish world in the Holocaust. What differentiates the two perspectives is the Israeli “vision of history [...] which serves the ideological needs of the current political situation” (15). Aleksandrowicz-Pędich concludes that the present study demonstrates the portrayal of Poles as “less negative than that which has been found by Soshana Ronen in her analysis of Israeli literature” (16). Similarly, American Jewish authors do not solely portray Poles in a negative way; however, pejorative traits prevail in their characterization, which, according to the author, “stems from the mistrust of the Other and bad neighborly relations between Jews and Poles, both in the Old World and the New” (20).

As the title suggests, the book is divided into two main topic areas: Part I, “Collective Portrait,” illustrates the representation of Poles in American Jewish fiction and addresses recurring assumptions of Polish anti-Semitism. The textual examples openly show anti-Semitic Polish characters or demonstrate this feature as inherent to Polish identity. There are “Unpleasant Polish Types”: primitive, strong, savage, cruel, and dishonest – the traits

which prove the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon stock. Neutral and positive, educated Poles appear sporadically in more recent fiction; however, there is an imbalance which leans towards a negative vision of the Pole and his/her marginal significance to the plot.

Part II, "Memory," is dedicated to the concept of memory and the Polish-related places it evokes: cities, shtetls, and ghettos. In subsequent parts, Poland is depicted as a country from the Old World, the site of World War II and the Holocaust, the land of death, and a hostile place. In the part entitled "The Jew and the Polish Inheritance," the author explores the extent of the role which Polish origin played in the establishment of cultural hierarchy among groups of Jews coming to America from various parts of Europe. Her conclusion is that Polish Jews, in the same way as Poles, were put in the lower class category, and the Old World inheritance "is usually perceived as a burden, because of its alienating impact on the immigrants from Poland in American society" (112).

The final part, entitled "Other Traces," provides various examples of cultural awareness, which is connected with Poland and Polishness. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich presents famous Poles (e.g. Bronisław Malinowski, Alfred Korzybski, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, Kazimierz Puławski) as well as Polish Jews (e.g. Vilna Gaon, Nachman of Bratslav, Ludwig Zamenhof, Janusz Korczak) who feature in American Jewish fiction. There are typically Polish artefacts, such as kielbasa and, more recently, souvenirs bought at Auschwitz. The author also gives examples of Polish-sounding names and places, which might be indicative of Polish origin, and makes references to contacts with contemporary Poland.

Drawing on her extensive research in American Jewish literature, the author shows how Poles and Jews have historically defined themselves as opposites. By providing diverse literary examples, the study challenges the belief in the persistence of negative characterization of Poles and Poland in more recent American Jewish fiction. The book does not tell us exactly how the image of the Polish anti-Semite originated, but it shows how deeply it has been ingrained in American Jewish culture. It is important to realize why this label has become culturally acceptable, in many cases reducing the history of Poles and Jews to stereotypes. Consequently, the extent and acceptability of such stereotypes informs about American Jewish culture at large. The book offers an insight into Polish Jewish cultural relations, showing that Poland and Poles are significant variables in creating the American Jewish identity, especially after the Holocaust. At the same time, it illuminates what the dangers of relying on myths, perceptions, and misconceptions, instead of facts, are. Finally, it demonstrates the viability of negative stereotyping and its implications for Polish Jewish relations. "The discourse featuring Poland as the land of the Holocaust has its impact on public life" (159), and remains damaging to mutual relations. The current image of Poland and Poles in the United States seems to logically follow attitudes and prejudices deriving from it. One of the book's merits is that interpretations and opinions included in the study are not final and offer a platform for further debate, which may help to show contentious issues in a new light. It is not addressed exclusively to literary critics, who undoubtedly will find it inspiring reading, but to all scholars interested in the problems of collective imagination and the role of stereotypes in the formation of an ethnic identity.