

Foodways and Memory: Polish-Jewish Relations in a Post-Holocaust Town

Abstract

This article explores how the contemporary Polish inhabitants of Dąbrowa Białostocka remember town's former Jewish community through the lens of foodways. By analyzing food-related practices, economic exchanges, and everyday interactions; the study examines how memory is shaped by structural amnesia, stereotypes, and post-memory narratives. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research conducted in the Podlasie region, the article highlights how food serves as both a site of remembrance and a vehicle for historical erasure. While Jewish merchants and tradespeople were once central to local food economies, their absence after the Holocaust has left both material and symbolic voids. The findings reveal that Jewish foodways persist in sensory and economic memory; yet they are often detached from individual Jewish lives. The study underscores the role of food in mediating Polish-Jewish relations and contributes to broader discussions on memory, forgetting, and the socio-economic legacies of multicultural pasts in the post-Holocaust communities.

Keywords: Jews in Poland, Polish-Jewish relations, Postmemory, Structural amnesia, Foodways, Shtetl, Antisemitism, Podlasie, Dąbrowa Białostocka

Dubrowa

They pass their days without the Jews;
I wonder, though,
About their nights.

Poem by Michael Nevins, whose family lived
in Dąbrowa prior to WWII, (1982).

This article takes as its central concern the question of how the Jewish communities of the small town of Dąbrowa Białostocka¹ in Eastern Poland are remem-

¹ Sometimes transcribed as Dubrowa in English sources.

bered by the present day Polish inhabitants of this area, and investigates how this memory is linked with material relations especially involving foodways. I look at foodways not only as the ways in which food is consumed but also, and primarily as the cultural, social and economic modes in which it is produced and circulated within the community (Belasco 2008; Montanari 2006). In this way the memory of Polish-Jewish foodways becomes a lens to investigate the everyday practices and economic relations of Poles and Jews, in particular how these relations are remembered and how they are used to interpret present days realities of the local population. Thus my aim is to explore how Polish-Jewish relations are remembered and mediated through foodways, investigate the ways in which food-related narratives reveal stereotypes and cultural differences, and examine how structural amnesia influences the memory of Jewish communities in this Polish region.

The text is based on extended research conducted in Eastern Poland (Podlasie region) countryside since 2009², which at first focused on present food practices. Since then, I have been strongly aware of how the past and the memory of the past is relevant on many levels to the people in Podlachia. This has pushed me towards posing new questions, which take as its primary objective the social memory of the everyday economies between the Jewish and Polish communities (including consumption practices and practices connected with food production and acquisition) of past time periods: namely the imaginaries of WWII and pre-war realities. I enquire how this memory is construed in communities of farmers and small towns dwellers in the borderland Podlachia region, Poland. There is substantial weight in the idea that this memory translates to the understanding of the present socio-economic reality, individual and collective identity, and attitudes towards the Polish state and its institutions. This understanding may be especially important now, when we are facing such a labile socio-political situation and when state politics have been actively playing on past sentiments and resentments.

² I base this article primarily on my research in Dąbrowa Białostocka between 2018–2019 as well as the analysis of transcripts of nearly 200 in-depth semistructured interviews previously conducted in Dąbrowa by me and a student research group I coordinated as well as on an archive search at the Warsaw Jewish Historical Institute. Substantial data were collected during a postdoctoral project funded by the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology in 2018–2019: 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted among rural and small-town inhabitants. In all cases the age and gender of interviewees reflected the aging, feminised demography of the region, though efforts were made to gather interviews reflecting all adult age groups. Methods of recruiting interviewees included: snow-ball sampling, ad hoc recruiting, participant observation. The article is complimented with data collected during earlier research in 2009–2013, financed by the Polish National Science Centre.

The Geopolitical and Historical Context

Dąbrowa Białostocka, and Podlasie, more generally, is a distinct region (Straczuk 1999, Engelking 2012) located on the border with Belarus (and earlier USSR), marked by religious-ethnic-cultural-linguistic diversity, migration tradition and the rural character of communities. Its unique history has been tragically affected by the extermination of local Jewish communities, the damages of WWII but also the prior mass suffering of *Bieżeństwo*³. WWII was followed by times of socialism, which along with state control and modernist imperatives perhaps surprisingly⁴ brought to the region substantial development of agriculture and industry.

The research area includes Dąbrowa Białostocka – a small town and local centre – and secondly the surrounding villages, which I study not as separate communities and isolated social spheres, but as geopolitically and socially linked with small towns (see Mroczkowska in print., Sowa 2011).

What is more, distinctive features of small towns are also connected with their former Jewish inhabitants especially in Eastern Poland. Small-towns were also treated specifically under the three partitions⁵.

Dąbrowa – as many other towns in this region, was actually a shtetl, much in a way evoked by Eva Hoffman (1998) although it has locally never been referred to as such. Before WWII, the majority of inhabitants were Jewish⁶, and thus the food relations, and economic relations would often in fact be Jewish-Polish relations. In 1936, the majority of the 108 craftsmen workshops in Dąbrowa was Jewish (according to a historical account, these included a sweets ‘factory, a hat-

³ A mass evacuation, mainly of the Orthodox people, from the western governorates of the Russian Empire into the center of the Empire, after crossing the frontline by the German army in 1915. Probably around 2-3 million people have fled their homes during *Bieżeństwo* (see Prymaka-Oniszk 2017).

⁴ After World War II, Poland’s socialist government implemented policies aimed at economic reconstruction and modernization. These included land reforms, the nationalization of industries, and the establishment of state-owned agricultural cooperatives. In rural regions like Podlasie, these changes led to mechanization in farming, increased agricultural productivity, and the creation of food-processing facilities. For example, the introduction of state-managed milk processing plants significantly boosted the local dairy industry (see: Zaremba 2005). Additionally, government-led infrastructure projects, such as building roads and electrification, improved living conditions and connectivity in small towns like Dąbrowa Białostocka.

⁵ The partitions of Poland were three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that took place in 1772, 1793 and 1795 thus ending the existence of the Polish state, and resulting in the elimination of the sovereign Poland for 123 years. The partitions were conducted by the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and Habsburg Austria, which divided up the Commonwealth lands among themselves progressively in the process of territorial seizures.

⁶ Although the ‘urbanized’ town area was inhabited mostly by Jews, the towns administrative powers were in the Polish hands, which, as some interlocutors explained to me was accomplished by administrative decision to incorporate the neighbouring Polish villages into the town borders, thus making Poles the voting majority able to elect their own town mayor.

maker workshop (Samojlik 1978, 24). At the end of 19th century, Jews comprised approximately 85% of Dąbrowa's population, contributing significantly to local trade and crafts (Crago 2012: 880). In 1921 there were 81 shops, also mainly Jewish. In 1921, the municipality of Dąbrowa Białostocka had a population of just over 3,000, of which 1,218 were Jewish, yet the Jewish population constituted 90% of the municipality's total population. Prior to the Second World War, the number of Jews living in Dąbrowa Białostocka was just under 1,200 (ibidem). To this day the town is associated with Jews which paradoxically is, as I would like to show further, a simplification that masks both the extended Jewish networks which stretched beyond the town, as well as the actual Christian-Jewish networks which operated within it.

During the winter months of 1941, the German authorities closed the ghetto, reducing its area to just two buildings that were habitable (one of which is a still existing cinema building). Those imprisoned were required to perform forced labor, predominantly engaged in the widening of the road between Sokolka and Janów Podlaski. The ghetto was liquidated on 2 November 1942. The surviving Jews were forced to march to a transit camp in Kielbasin, situated 28 kilometres from Dąbrowa. Those who were unable to maintain the pace were shot. The Jews of Dąbrowa were then transported to the extermination camp at Treblinka (Pilichowski 1979). Furthermore the town itself, for reasons still debatable among local populations was burned down by the German soldiers. Following this, people from the neighbouring countryside moved to the small town, and in this way former farmers – became the new town community, tied economically, historically, and often by blood to the countryside. They build and rebuilt the town on the ashes of Jewish homes, facing a vacuum in terms of social as well as economic relations that once connected the town with the surrounding countryside. One key player was significantly strengthened and made more prominent in the post-war co-creation of the “brave new world”: the state. It assumed control of numerous initiatives that had previously been organised at a local level, including farming, dairy production and agricultural technologies. This was the time when the town flourished, becoming an regional centre and benefitting from administrative reforms which decentralised Poland and transferred many of the competencies from cities and large towns to smaller towns⁷.

During the socialist era, Dąbrowa benefited from state-led initiatives, including investments in agricultural technology and local industries. However, the economic transition of the 1990s, marked by the shift to a market economy, resulted in the closure of many state-owned enterprises and the decline of local economies. This left towns like Dąbrowa struggling to adapt, leading to population decline and reduced economic opportunities. Consequently Dąbrowa, like many other small towns in Poland – was a silent ‘loser of transformation.’ The town deterioro-

⁷ See also: <https://biznes.gazetaprawna.pl/galerie/1182717,duze-zdjecie,2,przemyslaw-sleszynski-smierc-malych-miast-w-polsce.html> (accessed: 10.12.2020).

rated rapidly at all levels after 1989 – this, as is sometimes explained, was a direct result of the fall of industry and the administrative reform of 1999⁸.

The Food Perspective and History of Local Foodways

As stated above, the livelihoods of both the inhabitants of the villages around Dąbrowa as well as to some extent of the people in the town itself are centered around agriculture to which the idea of food production, sales and consumption is crucial. More generally, the role of agriculture historically and in the present has been paramount in Poland. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Poland was commonly referred to as the “granary of Europe” (Polish: *spichlerz Europy*). Under communism, agriculture, and more broadly food production, retained a unique place in the Polish state. Unlike other socialist countries, agriculture was never fully collectivised in Poland, making it a unique feature of Polish socialism. Hence, the role of agriculture (and thus food), in regard to the whole country, not only the region, was exemplary. This makes the food perspective highly inspiring as it allows for the study of the intersections between material reality and the discursive and sensual. It is also helpful in exploring these aspects of memory which are not often the main point of focus in memory studies, like the way in which memory is sensual, gendered, and familial.

More generally, the food perspective opens the door to a new orientation to the studies of the past because it were food networks which formed the basis of relations between farmers and Jewish communities. Looking at food networks and the memory of economic relations enables also understanding the perception of the embodied aspects of mutual networks which were formed although the exchange of food, and through that exchange of life, symbolic values, sensualities and difference. In this way I would follow an economic turn in the Jewish studies as proposed by Jonathan Karp, who urged by go beyond the “cloud of embarrassed silence [which] hovered over the topic of Jewish livelihoods” (Karp 2009: 8).

To examine the broad phenomena connected with food, its consumption, production, and exchange, I use the term »foodways« which refers to the connection between “food-related behavior and patterns of membership in cultural community, group, and society. In its most general usage, »foodways« refers to the systems of knowledge and expression related to food that vary with culture [...]. In specific usage, »foodways« refers to those food-related behaviors that are believed to identify the primary cultural attributes of an individual or group of individuals” (Camp 2003: 29–31). However, more generally, foodways also can

⁸ More on this: <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/578132,polska-lokalna-male-miasto-przemysl-mieszkanicy-upadek-gospdarka-praca.html> (accessed: 18.12.2024).

be understood in a more relational manner as ways in which food travels, both physically (from farm to fork) and symbolically, socially. Here I use this term in both these meanings and find it especially helpful to connect two sides of consumption: behavioural/attitudinal and relational/network. Hereby, I follow Johan Pottier's observations about the underlying force of food to establish relations, in that the 'power' of food lies in its embeddedness in social and symbolic relations (2002: 238). This connectivity and relationality of food can be understood in two ways, firstly through its inclusive aspect which stems from the notion of commensality. This idea refers to a group which is connected through food, through eating together (sharing meals, sharing tastes): "sharing food has almost magical properties in its ability to turn self-seeking individuals into a collaborative group" (Belasco 2008: 19).

Secondly, through exclusivity of food: excluding those who eat differently marks the boundaries of a community, but also of what is considered edible (see Belasco 2008), as noted by Massimo Montanari: „If the table is the metaphor for life, it represents in a direct and exacting way both membership in a group and the relationships defined within that group” (2006: 95). In this way, my starting point was the examination of certain food-network/infrastructure (Murdoch, Miele 2004: 106) which binds people in this community, at how it in turn is connected to memory.

Memory

The topic of Jews and Jewishness would appear almost spontaneously whenever questions were asked about the history of the town or about someone's birthplace. This spontaneity of memories, the fact that the topic was self-generated inspired me to look at the memory about people who are no longer physically present but who have still remained an important point of reference for the inhabitants of these region as there is a common conviction among the local people that the Jewish community had for centuries a lasting impact on the socioeconomics of the town. This is reinforced by the official local institutionalisation of social memory, namely the ways in which Jews are portrayed in local historical books or articles (see Bujnowski 2009). By selling and buying foodstuffs to and from local farmers, Jews were to shape the dynamics of mutual relations. According to a local historian's account wrote the 18th century „the town was the property of the king and functioned thanks to the Jewish people” (Bujnowski 2009: 15). Such publications contribute to how the social memory is formed.

The field of memory studies in regard to Jewish history is extensive and grounded on the recollections and reconstruction of Shoah. This area is nuanced and encompasses much, from case studies and histories of survivors, psychological studies, ethnic relations accounts to more general questions of the global rela-

tions of colonialism and totalitarianism (Arendt 1951). It involved numerous key studies on stereotypes, identities subject to negotiations, conflicts, and influenced by numerous discourses (cf. Keff 2003; Gruber 2003, 2004; Michlic et al. 2015; Tokarska-Bakir 2016). These works were my starting point and source of inspiration, however my own research questions differ from that of classical Jewish memory studies because I engage strictly with how non-Jews remembered Jews. In this way I reflect on how memory of Jews is used, lived, interpreted and creolised in today's reality and in the perception of this reality for Poles. Although I have managed to find some memory or postmemory accounts of Dąbrowa by Jews, they were not in this case my point of interpretation. What I wish to add is a perspective on memory about Jews through food memory studies, which stress the notions of senses, feelings, and the embodied, not only narrative, aspect of memory.

Burdened Memory

My Polish interlocutors live in a town that was once Jewish, in that way becoming what Levi⁹ called the implicated subjects (Primo Levi cf. Rothberg 2019), that is people who are the beneficiaries of historical events, although many of them were too young to be part of these events. This is a little similar to the concept of post-memory, that is the memory of those who were born but too young to remember. Marianne Hirsch, who introduced this concept, emphasized the transmission of trauma and collective memory across generations. This is particularly relevant to the Polish-Jewish context, where the near-total absence of survivors' direct testimonies has led to a mediated form of memory embodied in material culture and narratives of foodways. During my research I have encountered only one story with some indirect hints about the guilt of a local person in killing a Jew. There were however numerous accounts where the general feeling of guilt or shame in regards to Jews was present: these were narratives about refusing to keep safe the Jewish gold, where people have repeatedly tried to convince us that they have not appropriated any Jewish money or possessions. Overall, the interlocutors were adamant that no violence against the Jews at the Polish hands took place during the war. However, one thing was symptomatic and it justifies the sense to use the category of implicated subjects. Namely, the fact that although there were Jews from Dąbrowa who survived the war, none of them decided to resettle in this town after the war. I have heard a few accounts of Jews returning to the town to inquire about their relatives, about their houses, but they ultimately chose to lea-

⁹ According to Primo Levi these would be people who are beneficiaries of this past, like inhabitants of regions surrounding a concentration camp. They would be implicated synchronically, diachronically in historical events that were inherited.

ve¹⁰, including the notable Sonia Grabińska lub Gabowski-Letkowicz/Lewkowicz, a courageous escapee from Treblinka¹¹.

What stands out in this burdened memory is its incompleteness and silences. While the accounts of my research participants are significant, the omissions within these narratives are often even more telling. Paul Connerton identified seven types of forgetting, arguing that not all forgetting is inherently negative; it can also serve positive and practical purposes (2008). However, in the studied case, forgetting takes on a more troubling form. Firstly, as I will show, Jews are remembered as a collective group but erased as individuals. They are remembered broadly through their communal roles (e.g., as shopkeepers, merchants, or a majority demographic) yet despite attempts to reconstruct I have found absence of specific stories, scarce references to family or even first names, personal achievements, or unique contributions. The few names I have noted I forwarded to the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw Poland, however never during my research have I been able to find memories of ‘Avram-Yankel [who] netted fish, and Channah [who] baked her rolls and challah’ as referred to in the poem by Michael Neville whose ancestor left Dąbrowa just before WWII.

Secondly, Jews are physically absent from the town’s material “memory-scape.” While Connerton calls for a balanced view of forgetting, acknowledging its potential benefits, in this context, forgetting serves to erase and marginalize. This dynamic aligns more closely with Ricœur’s idea of memory as a reaction to forgetting (1995), where the act of remembering becomes a response to the gaps and silences created by historical erasure. In Dąbrowa, the act of forgetting Jewish history is intertwined with silences that obscure both the trauma of the Holocaust and the complexity of Polish-Jewish relations.

While the memory of Jews in Dąbrowa Białostocka is often overshadowed by collective amnesia and structural erasure, there exists a small, active group of individuals dedicated to preserving this history. Local activists, particularly students and teachers from the town’s high school, have organized initiatives such as cleaning the Jewish cemetery and hosting educational events. Additionally, efforts to document and share information about the town’s Jewish past are visible on the website Dąbrowa Wczoraj, which serves as an online repository of historical and commemorative materials. However, these localized actions have limited influence on the broader public narrative about Jews in Dąbrowa. For instance, the

¹⁰ Here are some information about families whose ancestors came from Dąbrowa: <http://dialog.org.pl/liderzy-dialogu/pl/lider/dorota-budzinska/> (accessed: 12.18.2024).

¹¹ Sonia Grabińska lub Gabowski-Letkowicz lub – Lewkowicz. According to records, she did return to Dąbrowa for a short time to discover that the plot where her house once stood was taken over by Polish neighbours; https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Dabrowa_Bialostocka/dab018.html (accessed: 13.01.2025); <https://www.jewishbialystok.pl/D%C4%85browa-Bia%C5%82ostocka-Sonia-Grabi%C5%84ska-Lewkowicz,5421,9438> (accessed: 13.01.2025); <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/survivor/sonialewkowicz.html> (accessed: 13.01.2025).

Wikipedia entry¹² for the town does not mention its historically significant Jewish population, illustrating the disconnect between these preservation efforts and the dominant discourse.

Jewish Traces: Memory and Erased Presence

Not a single Jew lives in the towns and villages where I conducted research. Most died in concentration camps and in the local ghettos including those in Dąbrowa and the neighbouring town of Sokółka. While some Jewish buildings in Sokółka still stand, there are none in Dąbrowa, as nearly the whole town was burned in 1941¹³. However there are material traces left behind by these people, although not all current inhabitants would undertake the effort to read them.

Firstly, in both towns there are Jewish cemeteries – both quite neglected and devastated, remaining for years popular places for social gatherings and romantic rendezvous. The road which links these towns was once built by Jews from the ghetto. This road constitutes a very mundane everyday experience for local folk, but at the same time its past is often forgotten (Biziuk 2009).

The historical traces of Jewish presence are further complicated by the paradoxical way these memories are embedded in local infrastructure yet remain unacknowledged. For instance the main road linking Dąbrowa with the administrative and economic centre of Sokółka (another mostly Jewish town) was built in the 1940s by Jewish forced labourers under the German occupation (Pilichowski 1979). What is more, the largest water basin in Sokółka was built by the Jews detained in Sokółka ghetto. The basin is a central local summer attraction, but nowhere in the general popular knowledge or media is the tragic history of these places mentioned. Even in spaces where Jewish history is visible – like the Jewish cemeteries, it is veiled, and efforts to bring this into the open meet with resistance. As local activists reported such was the case of a signpost pointing the way to the cemetery in Dąbrowa, which was continually being overturned, and finally had to be concreted to firmly stay in place. The Jewish cemetery both in Sokółka and in Dąbrowa are peripheral areas, visited usually by young people seeking a romantic recluse, or local men bibing. Attempts for commemoration generally meet with indifference or deference. Jewish history is physically and symbolically erased. Indeed it is paradoxical that in the center of Dąbrowa Białostocka in the place of the former XVIII century Jewish cemetery, there is now a large paved area with a kebab kiosk and a granite monument to commemorate those who are “inscribed in the memory of Dąbrowa Region”; among others local church members and Polish Catholic soldiers or local politicians.

¹² https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C4%85browa_Bia%C5%82ostocka (accessed: 23.02.2025).

¹³ <http://www.dabrowa-bial.pl/historia.html> (accessed: 21.03.2020).

The questions that I explore here concern whether this is a form of structural amnesia (as defined by Barnes 1947) – i.e., are Jews simply “socially unimportant” for the inhabitants of this poststetl or is it closer to what Ruth Ellen Gruber (2003) describes as a kind of repressed, uncomfortable truth of which the memory would lead to the feeling of guilt. The narratives of postwar residents point to unresolved tensions and guilt regarding the appropriation of Jewish property. These tensions manifest in the erasure of Jewish material heritage and ambivalence towards commemorative efforts. Then, how are the Jews remembered? As I wrote, they are very often referenced in conversations about the past of the towns. However the way these narratives are crafted suggests erasing or repressing certain themes. In the local narratives, collected during my ethnographic explorations, Jews are most often depicted as merchants who sell products to the farmer, so the connection with trade is fundamental/central. However, in the interviews I analysed, these images are almost immediately juxtaposed with themes connected with WWII. It was especially disturbing when the mention of the cruel injustice perpetrated against the Jews did not meet with any kind of condemnation on the part of my interlocutors. This was the case with a minority of interlocutors, however, there were individuals who expressed gladness to the fact that Jews are no longer part of this community.

The following excerpts from the conversations demonstrate how such representations are formed, and point to the importance of the specific dynamics of associations, notably how people promptly move from one topic to another, how the themes accumulate.

They would sell, sell things [...] and when the Germans came and took them to the ghetto, they would sell saccharin, similar to today's sugar, in tablets. If they managed to leave and were let go... because it was all fenced ... here, when the cinema is now, about half a hectare, and all of them were led there/herded there [Pl. *spędzili*] and they were all in this cinema. A thousand Jews were closed there. It was a type of ghetto. Because when they came [the German army] they would you know, in a car, in a car, “to the fuhrer” [i.e. Hitler], to the camps. I lived well with them [with the Jews], too bad for them, The Germans were here, the Germans agreed to this, maybe it was good? I don't know. They are ruling our world right now [the Jews], what have they done to us.... (2011, M, age 88).

Food, everyday economies, exchanges, and trade were one of the first associations with Jews. As a next step, Jews were immediately linked with three types of images. Firstly, stereotypic images, which would include representations of difference for example looking differently, engaging in different economic activity, praying differently, consuming different food, but also hurtful (and distorted) images which would perpetrate in the social imagination of this region like the gossip of Jews consuming the blood of the Catholic children in matza (on this common stereotype in Poland read: Cała 1992). Secondly, the narratives of Jews would almost automatically turn to the mention of Pogrom and the war, but this would nearly always be a very general, almost detached portrayal. And the third

image and third 'logic' of these narratives would be to interpret and 'dot the i's' of the Jewish history with the economic advantage which Jews supposedly had over Poles. Fourthly there was often a mention of the possible accusations Poles might face: of taking over Jewish money and possessions, of betraying Jews to the German soldiers. Here the interlocutors seem to answer the anticipated questions which might arise in a conversation on Jews.

These associations were not emotionally neutral, and were followed by stories which legitimised violence against Jews, justified this violence with fear, or with perceived exploitation or difference.

Below is another narrative example, similar in form, but very different in content:

There was a Jewess Yevka who had the best herring. But what they said about Jews capturing children (to drain their blood to be added to matza) – this is untrue. They were very good tailors. There were no witch hunts on them, no-one betrayed them/informed against them/gave them away. Obviously, the Germans came... I don't know whether they asked (Poles) for help, but I am sure they [the Poles] did not go with the Germans. They did not murder. Our stone cellar was built by Jews. If you didn't have money to pay, you gave grain. And I can also tell you that there are Tatars here and Belrussians and Catholics. There were never any conflicts. We have a Greek Orthodox neighbour here, and when he died the whole Catholic neighbourhood went to the Orthodox church] (W, 85).

Upon learning this and other similar accounts I was struck by the condensed nature of these narratives. They were composed of numerous very emotionally dense motifs. This particular memory starts with a reminiscence of food, through the sensual. Food nostalgia emanates from this account (and other similar) – Yevka sold the best herring. The taste of the past cannot be replicated now, the herrings of the past were different, larger, they were sold as whole salted fish, and consumed in this way, together with herring roe – something which may not be perceived as edible now. Dishes made from these herrings, herrings provided solely by Jews, imported by them from the seaside, would be part of most Catholic and Orthodox holiday meals – from whole baked salted herring for the Lent Christmas Eve supper, to herring consumed during Easter, to the everyday Friday Lent meals which were observed in this community well into the 2000s and sometimes even today.

It is important to consider the context in which these food memories are situated. This short narrative may be analysed by looking at what was retained in the social memory of the local community as well as what was forgotten. One notable characteristic of this memory is its succinctness: Yevka has no last name, no exact home – she is simply local. Her name does not tell a tale – it is a generic Jewish name. There is no story about her which follows. The only elaboration pertains to the products she sold. Her person is brought up only to be followed by a chaotic narrative which would culminate with a general declaration of local multiethnicity and unity. Therefore, the key point of this statement is not so

much the memory of the individual person but reference to the idea (if not the idyll) of religious and ethnic coexistence in this region. In this way, the inclusive function of food and food and economic relations is exploited in these narratives. The sensory nostalgia for the taste of the Jewish herring veils the real tragedy of the Jewish woman who sold it. Thus Jews despite being inscribed in memory of foodways and food-networks are painstakingly erased from the memory about community and neighbourhood networks.

Jews And Poles – The Perception of Difference

Conversely, food relations and networks were systematically involved in marking the otherness of the Jews. This was primarily the result of differences in foodways, which have symbolic explanations not only for the Jews, but also for the Poles. Although there exists a rich body of literature on Jewish food taboos and exclusions (Douglas 1966; Savage 2011; Yoskowitz and Alpern 2016), there are fewer accounts on how their neighbours – Catholics and Orthodox – perceived these rules. One particular consumption rule would stir greatest emotions – namely abstaining from eating pork and pork products. A local Catholic man would relate a well-known quasi apocryphic story, which circulated in the area probably for generations:

Why Jews do not eat meat? Maybe you don't know! Jews would make fun of Christ. They were so angry at him for being poor and creating mutiny among the Jews [...] So they hid a Jewess under a trough and they said to him 'If you are so wise, guess who is under this trough' And Jesus laughed, looked at them, maybe he didn't want to do what he was about to do, but he knew this must be so. Because (otherwise) they would make a fool out of Jesus. He said 'there is a pig (a female sow) with piglets under this trough'. And they would laugh their heads off, that this fool had not guessed the right answer. They lift the trough up and: a pig and its piglets walked out. And from then on they would not eat pigs. God forbid! They would buy a calf, a cow, even a horse, but they would not eat pork meat! (M, age 68).

This is a very perverse parable, as it is in this biased way that Jews were likened to pigs in this imaginarium (for other versions of this tale, refer to Zowczak 2013). According to this dehumanising logic, they would abstain from eating pigs in fear of cannibalism, of eating one's folk. What is worse, similarly to many other communities, also in Podlasie, pigs were associated with dirt and pollution as well as with lack of cognitive skills. This was a multilayered exclusion of Jews.

A parallel cannibalistic narrative to this was the one about Jews' hunger for Christian blood:

M: It was only to scare children. But you wouldn't go to Dąbrowa by yourself, always with your mom, because Jews would catch small children.

M2: There was this old woman who would say that they [Jews] needed Polish blood for some holiday of theirs. There was a kind of dough they made and baked on the stove, and they added blood to this. And they ate it like this, I meant they would talk like this (2011, W 87).

These dehumanising narratives are still strongly audible but their volume is conventionally diminished by the use of the accompanying term of gossip.

On a more general plane, food and agriculture is also involved in defining the stereotypic differences between Jewish and Polish (in this case farmers) life approaches. Foodways are intertwined with key values held by Polish farmers, who associate work with physical effort. In contrast, Jews were often perceived as people who do not work. For farmers *praca* – ‘work’, ‘labour’ denotes activities involving physical effort. Professional life which does not include physical labour, was undervalued and until today has sometimes not been considered ‘work’ at all. Such activities and modes of sustenance are also thought of as dishonest by the farmers¹⁴. As Jews were often involved in trade, acting as intermediaries between producers and consumers, they were sometimes unfairly stigmatized as those who immorally profited from the work of others. As were any people who engaged in such activities therefore alienating the ‘real’, ‘honest workers’. This rhetoric would be later – I believe – appropriated by the socialist state discourses about honest and dishonest work.

Renata Hryciuk and Ewa Moroz (2003) during their research in Eastern Poland made the following observations “Negative qualities ascribed to Jews were connected with their profession for eg. being a tradesman, shop-keeper, innkeeper. [...] Most often criticised qualities of the Jewish personality were among others: dishonesty”. One of their interlocutors remarked “They [the Jews] are completely different people, they cannot live if they do not make a fool of someone. They hated work, they could only engage in trade it was customary for them. They were dishonest, they cheated, even when this was something small, but they had to”¹⁵. The other said; “Jews did not work, they traded, but they were also good carpenters and tailors. They say that a Jew could sell and buy you without you realising when this happened” (Polish man, age 85, Jonawa) (ibidem, translation by the author).

Despite these opinions as well as similar which I have encountered in Podlasie, Jews were fundamental for the sustenance/survival of the Polish (Catholic, Ortho-

¹⁴ Paradoxically these narratives are in accordance with the Marxist disregard for work which profits thorough alienating the producer, although no farmer I have ever met would ever express direct support for the Marxist theories. Their origin is much earlier than the XX century, although it would be interesting to study how in fact the Communist ideology which built of the simplified Marxist ideas strengthened the disparities between urban and rural regions.

¹⁵ „Oni są zupełnie inni ludzie, oni nie mogą żyć, jak kogoś nie oszukają. Nienawidzili pracować, mogli się tylko handlem zajmować, taki był u nich zwyczaj. Nieuczciwi byli, oszukiwali, chociaż na głupstwie, a musieli [...] Oni są chytry i dobrze pracują w handlu, bardzo są uprzejmi, bo wiedzą jak z ludźmi żyć, żeby u nich kupowali.” (woman, age: 77, Makucie).

dox) inhabitants of this area. To put it differently, they as inhabitants of towns were the basis of town-countryside relations. The networks between the town and the surrounding villages, were, to a large degree connections between Jews and non-Jews. In this way, there is a paradox hidden in the Polish agrar ideal of self-provisioning. Although the Christian villages aimed for self-sufficiency, they could not sustain themselves without the Jewish towns as the place to sell their produce, their animals, to purchase salt and other condiments. Additionally, the Jewish towns provided opportunities for additional work and medical assistance. Essentially, as was sometimes voiced in the interviews: "If the Jew did not buy it... then there were no other place to sell it. In this way the farmer was in a difficult situation, he had the goods, but no-one [except the Jews] it sell them to." (M, 94)

In addition it was the town which was the source of luxury products and food-stuffs which were impossible to produce within the farmers homestead. Spices and condiments, as well as such things as baking powder, herring (a staple food during lent) and many other consumption products like sweets were purchased from Jewish merchants. These Jewish products added flavour to the everyday cuisine of the Catholics and the Orthodox. The Polish staple potato was eaten with Jewish salt.

While Jewish merchants provided essential goods such as salt and spices to Polish farmers, these interactions were reciprocal, as Jews relied on local farmers for fresh produce and dairy products. Accounts of these non-obvious food relations were more difficult to uncover during interviews and required detailed and specified questions. In this way, mentions of Jews as employers of Catholics and Orthodox (tasting the food of their employers) came unveiled. I also heard mentions of Jewish townsmen and women renting a small garden or keeping their cows at the Catholic farmer's homesteads and coming everyday to collect their products. Short accounts about purchasing meat which was deemed unkosher for Jews (for example slaughtered not fully according to kashrut rules) by the farmers were also collected during research. This mutual dependency underscores the complexity of economic relations in shtetls. These relations were established through everyday economies and activities, which connected the town and the countryside. People would often describe the lonely travellers, itinerant traders who would traverse the countryside, carrying on their back consumption items for barter exchange or offering their services to the locals:

W: They would go from house to house [...] So – tradesmen were Jewish, There was no Polish seamstress, there was no Polish smith – only Jews [...]. They would all stick with their own (W. 55).

M: A Jewish man would go on foot 7 kilometers to the village, he would come carrying a sack on his back and he had matches and coffee, and pins and safety pins, and he would carry it on his back. When he came my mom would give him a mug of milk straight away and some chives from the garden. And he would eat his chives, drink the milk and go (2011, M, age 90).

M: A Jewess, it was mainly Jewesses... she would take needles, buttons, this and that and she went to the countryside. She carried it all in order to sell it. In the shop you had to pay for this button with grosz [cash]. And when she went to the countryside, she would [say] – ‘Give me an onion, give me some potatoes’, give me this, give me that. And the farmer had it all. He had things to sell, but he had no one to sell it to... before the war, you understand (W, age 85).

It was a common belief about the one-direction flow of finances that would connect the Jewish town with the non-Jewish countryside. The need for additional money was severe in the villages especially following land consolidation reforms which created financial deficits in the community, many families had to build new houses because of local resettlements.

Before the war there was a bank named *Kasa Stefczyka*, now called SKOK [a type of savings and loan cooperative in Poland, modeled after Raiffeisen credit unions established in 1890 (Jaworski 1991)], it was the very same *Kasa Stefczyka*, that’s how it operated. And when this land consolidation took place, there were these parcels of land, 7-8 hectares, usually divided into minimum four parts, not counting the meadow [...]. This began to change. Some would go to the *Kolonie* [an extension of villages which were set up on the outskirts of the settlement, based on the consolidation reforms], and for this reason they had to build a new house – which meant they needed money. Where from? From the *Kasa*. [But] if you took a loan worth one cow, you would have to pay with four cows [...] So what to do? They would [instead] go to *Zeydek* or *Shlomo* – such were their names, there were many of them, I remembered their surnames but now I don’t remember. But there were a lot of them (2018, M, Dubrowa, age c 90).

There was a flow of capital: Jews would regularly, both officially, and in the grey zone grant loans to the village inhabitants. One type of these loans provided was for travel to the USA, which had enabled many to emigrate.

M: As they would say, people would go to America thanks to Jewish money. So if someone went... it meant he had contacts with the Jews, or someone had to make a guarantee or a Jew knew you, and you went to America and made money and send it back (M, age 77).

There were also numerous small-scale loans which were sometimes even paid in food and consumption products.

The Void: Postmemory

Below I cite the type of narratives about the awareness of Poles during WWII that Jews were being exterminated, and that local life would soon be inadvertently reconfigured:

W: In the past people would say ‘who will make the clothes when there are no more Jews??’ They made everything, fur coats, everything was made by the Jews (W, c. 75).

M: I remember my mother crying: what will happen to us, once the Jews are gone? Who will buy our wares/produce? (M, c. 80).

Such narratives are notable for their emphasis of a feeling of loss of a business partner, a seamstress, a supplier, rather than the loss of a neighbour. What seems to be fundamental for the interlocutors is the economic relationship, not the personal relationship. The disappearance of the Jewish community created a void not only in the town's community but also in its economic networks and relations. These were being meticulously rebuilt and developed by the communist state, which provided resources to reconstruct the town, establish shops, schools, banks and infrastructure.

What happened in respect to the social vacuum in the town is equally striking. It were the people from the surrounding villages who moved to the small towns. In this way what came to be was a community of farmers and postfarmers – people who reproduced many of the prewar networks but in a socialist reality. This reconstruction echoed to some degree the prewar past and memory. I come back to the questions asked by Michael Rothberg (2019) about the echoing and appropriation of different types of memory. My research points to the fact that this type of memory is relevant now. It informs frameworks in which other present day processes, especially market realities, are interpreted. Let us consider the following examples. The first one regards a popular Polish supermarket discount chain is commented upon:

- Why don't you like Biedronka [a popular discount supermarket]?

I: I don't like it, and I won't like it. Because most probably it is only a crypto-Jewish – not a Portuguese business. And these are their shops, not ours. And I have my own little shop in Dąbrowa (W, 77).

The second example is part of a wider conversation about limitations and difficulties for farmers in the EU reality, but also links Jews with largescale trade and points to conspiracy theories:

- So what changed after accessing the EU?

I: Something changed when it comes to how things look like. [...] But these are only 'cosmetic' changes. I would prefer Poland to be neutral like Switzerland. I think this would be more profitable. How can things improve here, if the people who rule us are 'bad Jewery' [*żydowstwo* – this is a highly pejorative term referring to Jewery of which I find no synonym in English].

M: It's done by the Jew [The term '*Żydek*' was used in Polish, which is a diminutive description], it's known, all this Jewery... these 'biedronki' [name of Polish supermarket] and „carrefours”. If you did deeper, it's all held by the Jews.

- Are there any changes after joining the EU?

M: [...] Something is being done in Dąbrowa, they cut something, but it's all going very slowly. These are cosmetic changes. When you go abroad, you see how it could look. I would prefer that we are neutral like Switzerland. That would bring more profit. But how when we are ruled by 'bad Jewery' [Pl: 'żydostwo'], Tusk [Donald Tusk, at the time of research was a politician of the ruling party, which had very little support among the local populations] and other dammed creatures (cholery), then how can it change for the better here (M, 79).

These statements suggest that antisemitic stereotypes are still used to evaluate economic, trade and even political relations and realities. Antisemitic stereotypes still serve a perceptive schema of evaluating material relations. The Portuguese owner of a chain of supermarkets is being evaluated through a perceptive cliché of pre-war provenance. According to this cliché or even mental framework, businesses would either fall into the category of 'Our' (Polish) or Jewish (foreign/other). This aligns with the process described by Anna Engelking in relation to the Polish-Belarusian borderland. This ethnographer observed that the inhabitants of this region 'invariably seek the elements of the peasant-nobility-Jew system, confronting their traditional worldview with the transformed social world of contemporaneity, a world without nobles and Jews' (2012, 454). Similarly, in the case of this (post)shtetl the (post)memory of Polish-Jewish foodways reveals that these modes of remembering are used to interpret present days realities of the local population.

Conclusions

The Jewish community of Dąbrowa Białostocka, Eastern Poland, lingers in the collective memory of its contemporary inhabitants, yet this memory is marked by omissions, erasures, and ambivalences. While Jews are remembered through material and economic associations—particularly in relation to foodways—this memory is often entangled with generalized stereotypes and faint, fragmented recollections of the Holocaust. These silences and distortions offer profound insights into how structural amnesia and postmemory operate in shaping collective consciousness.

Foodways emerge as a particularly revealing lens through which to understand Polish-Jewish relations. On one hand, they illuminate the intricate network of everyday interactions and mutual dependencies that once defined these communities. On the other, they perpetuate long-standing stereotypes, embedding them in the sensory and cultural fabric of local narratives. By linking the tangible—the preparation, exchange, and consumption of food—with the intangible legacies of memory and forgetting, foodways bridge past and present, revealing how history is interpreted and lived today.

However, the material absence of Jews in the town's 'memory-scape' stands in stark contrast to their enduring symbolic presence in narratives. This paradox

underscores the complexity of remembering: Jews are simultaneously a significant cultural reference and an erased demographic reality. Ricœur's conception of memory as a reaction to forgetting aptly describes this dynamic, where the act of remembering is not only selective but also shaped by silences that reflect unresolved tensions and guilt.

In my view the findings of this study extend beyond the local context of Dąbrowa Białostocka, offering broader implications for understanding how collective memory functions in post-Holocaust societies. They challenge us to reconsider the role of everyday practices, such as foodways, in both preserving and distorting historical memory. Moreover, they highlight the necessity of addressing these narratives critically to dismantle the residual antisemitism they often perpetuate.

Ultimately, the memory of Jewish foodways in Dąbrowa Białostocka is more than a relic of the past; it is a dynamic force that shapes present-day identities and interpretations of history. This study invites further exploration into how such sensory and material dimensions of memory can serve as gateways to deeper understanding, fostering acknowledgment in the complex landscape of Polish-Jewish relations.

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