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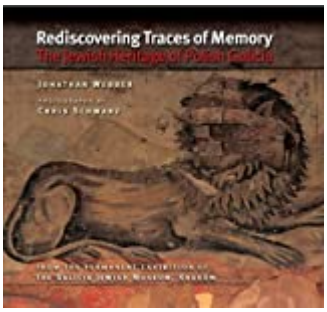

Jonathan Webber. *Rediscovering Traces of Memory: The Jewish Heritage of Polish Galicia.* Photographs by Chris Schwarz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. Illustrations. vi + 186 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22185-8.

Reviewed by Karen Auerbach (University of Michigan)

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Memory of the Jewish Past on the Polish Landscape

Rediscovering Traces of Memory embraces contradictions in memory of the Jewish past in contemporary Poland. The album reproduces seventy-four color images of synagogues, cemeteries, Holocaust memorials, Nazi camps, and other traces of Jewish presence and absence. Photographs and accompanying analysis explore memory of Polish Jewish life through its material heritage on the Polish landscape. On one level, the book, by the social anthropologist Jonathan Webber and the photographer Chris Schwarz (who died in 2007), is intended partly for a general readership, challenging those who see only neglect. On another level, however, *Rediscovering Traces of Memory* is the work of a scholar exploring narratives of the Jewish past preserved through its physical remnants while also attempting to access the history beyond that narrative.

Two structural elements characterize the album. The first is its division into five sections: âJewish Life in Ruins,â âJewish Culture as It Once Was,â âThe Holocaust: Sites of Massacre and Destruction,â âHow the Past Is Being Remembered,â and âPeople Making Memory Today.â This structure is in a sense artificial resulting in much overlap, as Webberâs introduction acknowledges, but the approach strives for theoretical coherence. The second approach separates the photographs, accompanied by brief captions, and extensive notes in the last third of the book for almost every image. The division allows the photographs to stand mostly on their own while permitting in-depth analysis.

Webber and Schwarz searched out little-known sites, and Schwarz returned to locations repeatedly to capture a particular mood, evoked by snow, shadows cast on a monument, sometimes a visitorâs expression. The images are from a collection that also forms the basis for the permanent exhibition at the Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow and for a catalog by Schwarz (*Photographing Traces of Memory: A Contemporary View of the Jewish Past in Polish Galicia/PodÄÅ¼ajÄc Åladami pamiÄci: WspÃ³Åczesne spojrzenie na Å¼ydowskÄ przeszÅoÅÄ Galicji* [2005]).

Documenting the Jewish material heritage in Poland has been an increasing focus of scholarship and public

attention in recent decades. Polish scholars and intellectuals began to take more interest in the fate of physical traces of Jewish life particularly in the early 1980s, when discussion about Polish-Jewish relations emerged as part of the anti-Communist opposition. An early example is Monika Krajewskaâs black-and-white album of Jewish tombstones in Poland (*Czas Kamieni* [1983] and *A Tribe of Stones* [1993]).[1]

Webberâs notes, in particular, distinguish *Rediscovering Traces of Memory* from other albums. His analysis takes the form of a lengthy riff on Jewish life, the Holocaust, Polish-Jewish relations, and memory of the Jewish past. Some explanations, such as the history of Hasidism, will not be entirely new to specialists. Yet close attention to detail, together with cooperation between photographer and anthropologist, makes the work an important contribution to scholarship; interaction between image and analysis often tells a different story than the photograph alone would. One of the most effective images has an impact precisely because of this analysis. The photograph depicts a broken tombstone that was used to pave the entrance to a farmerâs home. On its own, the scene testifies only to destruction. Webberâs comments tell a more nuanced story, however. The farmer told Schwarz that his father-in-law had taken the tombstone from the cemetery decades earlier, but that the farmer âwas uncomfortable about what had been done and wanted to return the stone to the cemetery.â Decades after the father-in-law took the tombstone, Webber comments, âthe past yields up the deadâ (p. 38). But the desecration also led to an irreversible loss of that past, he notes; the date and parts of the tombstone are missing. One might also ask what impact the photographerâs presence–an outsider inquiring about a shameful act–might have had on the farmerâs reflections.

Rediscovering Traces of Memory emphasizes preservation over neglect. Several images document connections to Poland among Polish Jews and their descendents abroad, as well as Jewish communities in contemporary Poland that preserve memory through their very presence. Religious life, especially Hasidism and synagogues, is a particular focus. Krakow and Auschwitz are represented more so than other locations; there is more to depict there than elsewhere, since only sixty synagogues and prayerhouses survive in Polish Galicia, Webber notes. Several photographs portray the lesser-known death camp at BeÅÅ¼ec, including a new memorial that was dedicated in 2004. Images of village synagogues and cemeteries bring to the fore understudied aspects of Jewish life connected with Galicia, which is historically more rural than many other parts of Poland. (Since the album focuses on Polish Galicia, it does not include the parts of Galicia further east, which were occupied by, and then incorporated into, the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War. These eastern areas are part of contemporary Ukraine.)

By depicting both presence and absence, the book attempts to untangle tensions between history and memory of Polish Jewry: forgetting and remembering, preservation and neglect, legacy of diverse Jewish life and the Holocaustâs shadow, an image of Poland as a âparadise for Jewsâ and the stereotype of Poland as a country of antisemites (p. 137). A photograph of a Jewish cemetery in the village of Stary DzikÃ³w portrays these ambiguities starkly. No tombstones survived at the burial ground, which is an empty field. But according to Webber, absence has symbolically preserved the graveyard: âin the minds of the local villagers the field is still the Jewish cemetery and they let the site remain undisturbedâ (p. 111).

This interpretation is consciously optimistic. Yet the album does not overlook troubling aspects of Polish-Jewish relations. One image, for example, depicts a tombstone marking the murder of Jews during anti-Jewish riots in seventeenth-century Krakow. Antisemitic graffiti is evident in several photographs, and Webber addresses this defacement. Here, too, he challenges generalizations, pairing on one page an image of antisemitic graffiti on a cemetery gate with a smaller photograph of anti-Nazi graffiti. Webberâs accompanying notes examine antisemitic violence in Poland before, during, and just after the Holocaust. Another image shows a Holocaust memorial in a Jewish cemetery in the town of Wieliczka that was defaced with the words âNazi OK.â Webberâs optimism again takes precedence. The caption does not mention antisemitism. In the notes, Webber explains first that non-Jews are increasingly involved in preserving Jewish memory, a reflection of improving Polish-Jewish relations. This argument threads throughout *Rediscovering Traces of Memory*, and the book documents such efforts well. For Jewish visitors, antisemitic graffiti often overshadows Polish efforts at commemoration; Webber sees first the preservation rather than the desecration of memory.

Webber then delves into the treacherous terrain of stereotypes of the âotherâ by Jews abroad and non-Jews in Poland. In doing so, Webber and Schwarz are asserting their voices in ongoing public and scholarly discussions about Polish-Jewish relations. Addressing the

graffiti, Webber rejects the stereotype of âPolish antisemitism.â To be sure, he notes, the graffiti is a âparticularly painful sight inside a Jewish cemetery in Poland, as for many Jews it brings to mind a long history of anti-Jewish disturbances–not to mention the Holocaust itself–in that country, as well as the antisemitic policies of the Polish government in the 1930s and post-Holocaust pogroms…. They say that âthe Polesâ helped the Germans to kill Jews, and even that the Poles were worse than the Germans…. The daubing of âNazi OKâ on a Holocaust monument would seem to many Jews to confirm such feelingsâ (pp. 156-157). But, Webber continues, antisemitic graffiti is present in many countries: âAnti-Jewish *violence* is in fact quite rare in present-day Poland; and anti-Jewish sentiment is probably no worse than in other European countriesâ (p. 157). A more pessimistic reading would challenge this interpretation as overly optimistic, and in other contexts as apologetic. Yet Webber seems to take an intentionally polemical approach to draw attention to Polesâ active involvement in remembering the Jewish past.

At times, Webberâs focus on rapprochement only hints at complexities. One photograph, for example, depicts a painting by a Polish student in the city of OÅwiÄcim (Auschwitz in German) of a young Jewish couple standing in front of a church adjacent to a synagogue. Webber concludes that âsympathetic teaching of the younger generation of Poles about both the Holocaust and the Jewish past of their countryâ has been a focus of Polish education since the fall of Communism (p. 116). Several Polish scholars have noted a simultaneous trend, however. They have concluded that most young Poles know relatively little about the Jewish past and the Holocaust and that most Poles reject scholarship by Jan Gross and others documenting anti-Jewish violence by Poles just after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.[2]

Webber is reflective about the narratives that photographs have constructed about the Polish Jewish past. The most insightful example traces the many uses of an image depicting a courtyard in Krakowâs mostly Jewish Kazimierz section. The scene is more evocative of a small-town setting rather than a large urban one. Webber notes that Roman Vishniacâs postwar albums included a photograph of this courtyard taken in 1937; the scene was also depicted by a nineteenth-century Jewish photographer, Ignacy Krieger (*Album fotografii dawnego Krakowa z atelier Ignacego Kriegera* [Album of photographs of old Krakow from the studio of Ignacy Krieger] [1989]), and by the Polish-Jewish historian Majer BaÅaban in a 1935 guidebook (*Przewodnik po Å¼ydowskich zabytkach Krakowa* [Guide to Jewish relics of Krakow]). The courtyard is âprobably one of the most famous single images of an urban shtetl scene,â according to Webber (p. 59).

He then focuses on Vishniacâs erroneous description of the image as âthe entrance to Kazimierz, the old ghetto of Cracowâ and the assumptions its viewers often make (p. 145). Kazimierz, Webber explains, was not a ghetto in the sense of an enclosed, enforced Jewish space, and the courtyard was not the neighborhoodâs entrance. He notes that Steven Spielberg also set scenes of *Schindlerâs List* (1993) in the courtyard, using Kazimierz to stand in for the wartime ghetto, which was located elsewhere in Krakow. The nostalgic view of the shtetl and the retrospective lens of the Holocaust help to explain why this and other scenes have become iconic images. At the same time, this nostalgia is partly a *result* of the iconic status created by Vishniacâs and othersâ uses of these images.

Webberâs analysis draws on similar inquiries as those posed by Jennifer Tucker and Tina Campt in a recent article about the use of visual images as historical sources: âWhat role does the intention of photographers play?… Why, and in what ways, do some pictures, and not others, acquire iconic power and come to represent in condensed fashion a historical moment?â They note that scholars are increasingly paying attention to photographs as sources of study in themselves. This scholarship has used âphotographs to enact a reckoning with history that takes the measure of the residual effects of the past in the present, as well as in the future.â[3] Webber and Schwarzâs album is a notable example of such analysis. Like Vishniacâs work, Webber and Schwarz emphasize religious life with less attention to the increasingly secularizing prewar Jewish population. (In Webber and Schwarzâs case, this focus is mostly pragmatic. Synagogues and cemeteries preserve memory of Jewish life more obviously than do more mundane traces, such as buildings that housed secular Jewish institutions.) Yet in other ways, *Rediscovering Traces of Memory* can be seen as a corrective to Vishniacâs albums. Vishniac, who chronicled East European Jewish life in the second half of the 1930s, created a skewed and sometimes inaccurate narrative that emphasized poverty and persecution. Vishniacâs focus on economic desperation and religious life, the researcher Maya Benton recently found, stemmed from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committeeâs instructions for his trips, which were part of a fundraising project.[4] Vishniac then cast the photographs in the Holocaustâs shadow in postwar publications.

The narrative of Polish Jewish life told through Vishniacâs photographs, Jeffrey Shandler has argued, evolved after the war as uses of the images changed with cultural agendas. As a result, the âtime of Vishniac,â in Elie Wieselâs words, is not only the prewar period but also âa time that extends ... beyond the Holocaust itself into the dynamics of post-war remembrance,â according to Shandler.[5] Recent photobooks, such as *Rediscovering Traces of Memory*, can be seen as part of a new stage in this âtime of Vishniac,â when Jewish visitors are rediscovering the countries where prewar East European Jewish life and the Holocaust took place. Where Vishniac kept the landscapes of Eastern Europe in the background, Webber and Schwarz place those landscapes in the foreground. And where Vishniac emphasized isolation, *Rediscovering Traces of Memory* highlights interactions with non-Jews and the specificity of the settings where Jews lived.

Yet *Rediscovering Traces of Memory* is characterized inevitably by the same contradictions as Vishniacâs work. The latterâs albums, Shandler has argued, preserved memory of Jewish life but also contributed to the âvanishingâ of memory because of the retroactive lens of the Holocaust, which has obscured prewar history.[6] Webber and Schwarz cannot avoid this effect, either. Although synagogues, cemeteries, and other remnants serve as placeholders for Jews who once lived in these towns and cities, the absence of people in almost every photograph testifies to the communitiesâ vanishing as well.

Even more so than written documents, perhaps, photographs underscore the challenges of accessing history beyond memory. Yet Webberâs analysis and Schwarzâs photographs accomplish more than finding traces. *Rediscovering Traces of Memory* tries to reach beyond a Jewish memory of Poland that is at once nostalgic and skewed by the Holocaustâs shadow. They trace the shaping of memory, progress in overcoming barriers to dialogue, and the limits of remembering.

Notes

[1]. See also Jeffrey Gusky, *Silent Places: Landscapes of Jewish Life and Loss in Eastern Europe* (Woodstock: Overlook Duckworth, 2003); and Zalman Gostinski [Gostynski] and Adam Buyak, *Bate-keneset u-vate-âalmin be-Polin ve-hurbanam/Polish Synagogues and Cemeteries and Their Destruction* (Tel Aviv: Muzeâon haarets, Muze-on le-etnografyah u-le-folklor, 1971), also published as *Shteyner dertseyln* (Paris: Farband fun di Mizrekh Eyropeishe Yidn in Frankraykh, 1973).

[2]. See, for example, WÅodzimierz Mich, âWokÃ³Å (nie)pamiÄci ZagÅady,â [About the (non)memory of the Holocaust], in *PamiÄÄ Shoah: Kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiÄtnienia* [Memory of the Shoah: Cultural representations and practices of commemoration], ed. Tomasz Majewski and Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska (Lodz: Officyna, 2009): 349-352.

[3]. Jennifer Tucker with Tina Campt, âEntwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Inquiry,â *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 6, 3.

[4]. Alana Newhouse, âA Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac,â *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 1, 2010, 36. Compare Vishniacâs albums with the more diverse representations in Alter Kacyzne, *Poyln: Jewish Life in the Old Country*, ed. by Marek Web (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 1999).

[5]. Jeffrey Shandler, ââThe Time of Vishniacâ: Photographs of prewar East European Jewry in Post-war Contexts,â *Polin* 16 (2003): 316.

[6]. Ibid., 317.