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# The Things that Affectively Live On

## The Afterlives of Objects Stolen from Mass Graves<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The problem of grave-robbing at the sites of the former Nazi extermination camps in occupied Poland has received increasing academic interest recently. Rediscovered in historical research and brought to public attention by the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's and Irena Grudzińska-Gross's *Golden Harvest* (2012), this practice, undertaken by local villagers searching for gold and other valuables allegedly hidden among and in the human remains of the camps' victims, has since been engulfed in controversy around its meaning and social causes. At the same time, the objects stolen from the mass graves at the sites of the extermination camps have begun to resurface – sometimes they are even brought back to the sites from which they were taken. Focussing specifically on the 'Aktion Reinhardt' extermination camp at Belżec, this paper traces the material afterlives of the stolen objects and the transformations of the affective, political and symbolic economies structuring their handling. Providing an interpretative gaze on the circumstances of their theft, their integration into the daily lives of the inhabitants of Belżec, and finally their return, this paper brings to the fore the affective afterlives of those objects, and investigates their potential to challenge the cultural economies of science surrounding practices of grave-robbing at the sites of the former Nazi camps in post-war Poland.

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, a middle-aged man arrived at the newly opened museum at the former National Socialist extermination camp in Belżec, Poland, with the intention of giving back a ring given to him by his grandmother, a Polish resident of Belżec, almost 42 years previously. The ring, a piece of gold jewellery adorned with a ruby, most probably intended as a future engagement ring for an adolescent grandson, was given to a museum employee with a letter explaining both its provenance and the reasons for its return. The man, who described himself in the note as a successful Belżec-born entrepreneur from Szczecin, kept his grandmother's gift hidden in a box until the summer of 2005, when an unexpected and somewhat traumatic event forced him to cast his mind back to this long-forgotten piece of family property.

"I was returning from Berlin with my business partners. We were driving in a fast car back to Szczecin. In the middle of the journey the momentarily distracted driver nearly caused an accident at the speed of 200 km/h. In a fraction of a second – this must have been fate – he managed to turn abruptly and prevented us from crashing into another car. My life would have been cut short – but I was left to live. On that night I had a vivid, almost realistic dream. A young Jewish girl appeared and in a quiet voice instructed me: 'Januszek'<sup>2</sup> (that's what she was calling me, Januszek) you

1 I wish to thank the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI), which generously supported my research. An extended version of this article will be published in Christoph Kreutzmüller/Jonathan R. Zatlin (ed.), *Dispossession. Plundering German Jewry, 1933–1953*, Ann Arbor 2016. Forthcoming.

2 Januszek is a diminutive of the once popular Polish name Janusz.

have my ring. Take it, take it back to Bełżec and leave it there, give it back. It belongs to me.”<sup>3</sup>

The dream evoked a seemingly obvious association between the golden ring and the former Nazi camp, where the extermination of almost 450,000 people persecuted as Jews occurred between March and December 1942.<sup>4</sup> The man, whose family lived in the vicinity of the camp during the war and long afterwards, had strong memories of other peoples’ excursions to the site and of his own ‘treasure-hunt’ expeditions undertaken during summer visits to his grandparents’ house.

“On many occasions, I spent time on Kozielsk and its surroundings. I remember that as a child I used to collect a variety of beads, rinsed out of the so-called ‘ground’ by the rain. [...] As a child I did not really know what happened at the site. Bones and human skulls were scattered all over the place, I must have thought that this was just another cemetery. Only after many years did I learn that it was a death factory. [...] Everybody knew that Bełżec was a ‘gold mine’, that is why the majority of the inhabitants were in possession of various items of value, whose real value they could not even estimate. And so, on my eighteenth birthday my grandmother [...] gave me a ring – the protagonist of this story. [...] It is May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, I came from Szczecin to Bełżec to fulfil the request of the young Jewish girl from my dream, who had been cruelly deprived of her life. Why did she choose me? I feel relieved.”

Woven together from vague hints, puzzling evasions, unarticulated causalities and somewhat surprising political statements,<sup>5</sup> the letter tells a fascinating story of the trajectories of travel of the property once belonging to the Jewish victim of the extermination camp. As such, it directs attention to the often marginalised aspect of the afterlife of the “Holocaust gold”<sup>6</sup> whose fate has for some time now been a matter for both academic research and public, emotionally highly-charged debates.<sup>7</sup> Centred around and in fact triggered by the controversies surrounding the problem of restitution in the last decade of the twentieth century, these discussions not only exposed the extent of the financial gains made by the “Third Reich” and by other European countries as a result of the continent-wide process of dispossessing European Jews but also brought to the fore the practice of robbing the victims of the extermination and concentration camps, considered the ultimate symbol of violence and dehumanisation perpetrated by the Nazis. Constituting the “dreadful endpoint in the long chain of dispossession”<sup>8</sup> undergone by the Jewish victims of National Socialism from 1933 onwards, the organised theft of the possessions of people sent for extermination, including the utilisation of their corpses by robbing them of their

3 Archive Museum-Memorial Site Bełżec (PMM-B), PMM-B-3015; the ring was stored together with the letter for many years in the magazine of the State Museum at Majdanek, and has been kept in the archives of the Museum-Memorial Site at Bełżec since February 2014.

4 Robert Kuwałek, *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu* [The Death Camp at Bełżec], Lublin 2010, 170-172.

5 At the end of the letter its author declares, for instance: “I will not hide the fact that I empathise with Israel in her struggle with Palestine.”

6 Instead of employing the widespread category of “Nazi Gold”, which (once more) discursively deprives the true owners of their property, I prefer to use the notion of “Holocaust gold” coined by Raul Teitelbaum and Moshe Sandbar. The German term *Opfergold*, the gold of the victims, would probably be the most appropriate. Raul Teitelbaum/Moshe Sandbar, *Holocaust gold from the victims to Switzerland. The Path of the Nazi Plunder*, Tel Aviv 2001.

7 See for instance Martin Dean/Constantin Goschler/Philip Therr (ed.), *Robbery and Restitution. The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe*, New York/Oxford 2008.

8 Bertrand Perz, *Die Verwertung des Opfergoldes aus den Vernichtungslagern der ‘Aktion Reinhard’*, in: *Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes* (ed.), *Forschungen zum Nationalsozialismus und dessen Nachwirkungen in Österreich*, Vienna 2012, 131-153, here 131.

gold teeth, has since received a considerable amount of scholarly attention.<sup>9</sup> The same is true of the controversial journeys of the expropriated property to various institutions and individuals in Germany and beyond, and those of the ‘dental gold’ acquired in the extermination camps to banks in the Reich and in Switzerland.<sup>10</sup> Yet the material and cultural fate of the ‘Holocaust gold’ left behind at the sites of the former Nazi extermination camps – adding another link in the “long chain of dispossession” – still remains notably under-researched.<sup>11</sup>

In this respect, while the letter deposited in the museum at Bełżec cannot be considered representative, it seems incredibly valuable, because it is rare and particularly instructive. Recounted from the perspective of an individual who had in his possession for more than four decades an item taken from the site of the former Nazi extermination camp, and who was himself involved in the practice of collecting ‘abandoned’ objects at the site, it allows a deeper look into the afterlives of the ‘Holocaust gold’ at Bełżec, both material and affective. The importance of the latter dimension for thinking about the ‘property transfers’ resulting from the Holocaust is, in this case, quite evident: not only did the young boy – as he was – perceive the visits to the site as “eerie” and anxiety-inducing, due to the uncanny atmosphere of the place permeated by the “sad rustle of the forest [...] [resembling] supernatural singing, and by the terror, fear, and sorrow”,<sup>12</sup> but also as a mature man he reached the decision to return the property of the “young Jewish girl” to the site from which it was taken, essentially driven by an affect discharged by the ring and mediated by an unexpected dream.<sup>13</sup> The reconstruction of the route of the golden ring retraced in the jagged narrative of the middle-aged entrepreneur unveils, therefore, the dense web of meanings, interpretations, and affects surrounding the practices related to the objects found at the site of the former extermination camp.

The relevance of an affect-oriented approach to the fate of Jewish property taken by Poles during the war and in the immediate post-war years was also hinted at by historian Dariusz Stola. Focussing on the affective dimension of the recent Polish restitution debates and on the unquestionably moral and political – as opposed to merely legal – context of the material objects around which it revolves, Stola wrote about the power of post-Holocaust objects and, one can assume, ‘Holocaust gold’, to awaken unease among those who personally acquired them and the representatives of the second or third generations of their Polish owners. “If one takes shadows as a metaphor for the past, one could say that ‘formerly Jewish’ objects cast a deeper, darker shadow than others, as almost every one of them has a dramatic history”,<sup>14</sup> he stated in an article titled *The Polish Debate on the Holocaust and the Restitution of Property*. Moreover, the fact that the objects “did not come into the possession of

9 See for instance Andrzej Strzelecki, The Plunder of Victims and their Corpses, in: Yisrael Gutman/Michael Berenbaum (ed.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 1998, 246-269.

10 Ralf Banken, *Edelmetallmangel und Grossraubbirtschaft. Die Entwicklung des deutschen Edelmetallsektors im ‘Dritten Reich’ 1933–1945*, Berlin 2009.

11 Similarly, the afterlives of the *Opfergold* buried together with the victims of the *Einsatzgruppen* at the killing sites spread throughout Eastern Europe have yet to become the object of scholarly research. The fact that the mass graves resulting from the ‘Holocaust by bullets’ were plundered by the local populace is well documented by Patrick Desbois. Patrick Desbois, *Holocaust by Bullets. A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, New York 2008.

12 PMM-B-3015.

13 In conversations with the employees of the Museum-Memorial Site at Bełżec, I learned about two other instances of the return of objects taken from the site which were triggered by dreams, namely a golden coin and a roll of barbed wire: see interviews conducted by the author, 16 October 2013 and 24 September 2014.

14 Dariusz Stola, *The Polish Debate on the Holocaust and the Restitution of Property*, in: Dean/Goschler/Therr (ed.), *Robbery and Restitution*, 240-258, here 251.

[their] new owners by the usual means of legal sale or inheritance” can, according to Stola, be a reason for strong affective responses.

Hypothetically ascribing this affective power to the fact that “collective yet subconscious knowledge of the crimes against the [rightful] owners clings to ‘former Jewish’ property”,<sup>15</sup> the metaphor of “the objects with a shadow” in Stola’s article applies first and foremost to the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis from which, nevertheless, many Poles derived financial benefit. This phenomenon has been ‘rediscovered’ in recent Polish academic discourse<sup>16</sup> and conceptualised through a broad and descriptive notion of the “appropriation of Jewish property”.<sup>17</sup> It could therefore, indeed, be considered extremely shadow-generating. Gathering various forms of indigenous participation in the Nazi plunder of the Jews (for instance through trusteeship), the practice of taking possession of the real-estate and objects left behind by their owners deported to the extermination camps, of taking over the occupational positions held by Jews before the war, of *szmalcownictwo* [blackmailing], and of the widespread and normalised plunder of ‘post-Jewish property’, as it was commonly referred to even during the war, the ‘appropriation’ itself must have, as a result, had many affectively charged shades of grey.

Although Stola almost immediately dismissed his own interpretation of the affective afterlives of the ‘formerly Jewish’ objects as historically untestable and empirically unverifiable, there are theoretical approaches available to the scholar that render such an interpretation legitimate and productive. Yael Navaro-Yashin has written an ethnographic study of the Turkish-Cypriot experience of the properties left behind by the Greek-Cypriots expelled from Northern Cyprus in 1974 in the aftermath of the invasion of the island by the Turkish army and the consequent partition of the state. She shows, for instance, how the abandoned and plundered material objects continued to affectively *live on*, to this day influencing the daily interactions between people and the properties they acquired as a result of the war.<sup>18</sup> Though the situation analysed by Navaro-Yashin differs significantly from the reality of post-Holocaust Poland – the former being an outcome of long-lasting ethnic tension forcefully resolved by invasion and the creation of an internationally unrecognised polity, resulting in expulsions on both sides of the ethnic divide – her reflection on the emotive afterlives of things acquired by the Turkish-Cypriots shows the direction in which an affect-oriented approach could lead. Of central importance for Navaro-Yashin is the practice of *ganimet* – a word with Ottoman roots referring to the looting of a defeated enemy – which in the aftermath of the 1974 invasion came to designate the violence entailed in taking over another community’s belongings. Though legitimised and supported by the newly established state, the practice and the resulting interactions with objects won through *ganimet* have brought about a lingering state of unease among Turkish-Cypriots dwelling in expropriated houses and with misappropriated objects: a feeling, in an anthropological view, inflicted upon them by plundered properties, and irreducible to merely subjective emotional landscapes.

15 Ibid.

16 Jan Tomasz Gross/Irena Grudzińska Gross, *Golden Harvest. Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, Oxford/New York 2012; Jan Grabowski/Dariusz Libionka (ed.), *Klucze i kasa. O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950* [Keys & Cash. The Fate of Jewish Property in Occupied Poland and in the Immediate Postwar Years, 1939–1950], Warsaw 2014.

17 Jan Grabowski/Dariusz Libionka, *Wstęp* [Introduction], in: Grabowski/Libionka (ed.), *Klucze i kasa*, 7–28, here 24.

18 Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects. Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2009) 15, 1–18; Yael Navaro-Yashin, *The Make-Believe Space. Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*, Durham/London 2012.

This assumption, building upon Bruno Latour's theories of non-human agency and the ideas developed within the framework of contemporary affect theory, allows Yael Navaro-Yashin to construct affect as irreducible to human subjectivity. Rather, the category of affect has to be thought of as relational, establishing exchange between subjects and the environments which they inhabit.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, mediated by daily dealings with looted goods, the memory of the morally problematic, violent economy of *ganimet* prevents a full domestication of the misappropriated objects and thus constitutes the source of the affective dynamics of melancholia and abjection that underlie these interactions.

Interestingly, a notion similar to that of Turkish-Cypriot *ganimet* had already gained discursive prominence in Poland during the war. Referring initially to the plundering of Warsaw in the aftermath of the 1943 and 1944 uprisings, and popularised in the context of the looting of abandoned German properties in the so-called 'recovered lands', the notion of *szaber* – conceptualised nowadays as war-related plunder performed along ethnic or national lines on the abandoned property of 'the other'<sup>20</sup> – also encapsulates the earlier robberies of Jewish stores and houses in the wake of the war, of the ghettos vacated in 1942 to 1944, and of the property belonging to the exterminated Jews.<sup>21</sup> Thus *szaber*, to a great extent feeding upon the outcomes of the violence perpetrated on the 'other' (the Jews) by the other (the Nazis), and itself considered a form of violence, was intrinsically entwined in the "Holocaust economy" in which "the platitude of the appropriation of the post-Jewish property corresponded with the platitude of the Jewish death",<sup>22</sup> to slightly paraphrase Sławomir Buryła.

As the Belżec letter clearly suggests, an awareness of this unsettling connection was not lacking among the inhabitants of Belżec who were, after all, looting a 'gold mine' over which human bones and skulls were scattered. Moreover, its author explicitly acknowledged the entanglement of the practice of collecting items at the site of the former camp with the broader machinery of the Nazi dispossession of the Jews. Referring to the fact that his relatives lived in the immediate vicinity of the camp during the war and in its aftermath, he stated: "As a family they knew and 'felt' a lot. There was no difference between them and the French, Swiss etc. – while helping, they got rich."<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, this in many respects puzzling and largely defensive statement has an uncanny resonance with a thesis advanced by Jan Gross and Irena Grudzińska Gross in *Golden Harvest: Events at the Peripheries of the Holocaust*, the first book to publicise the enormous scale and detrimental consequences of Polish participation in the wartime plunder of the Jews, published in Poland in 2011. Reflecting on indigenous consent and cooperation as preconditions for the possibility of the success of Nazi expropriation and extermination policies, and on the commonality of the experience of dispossessing Jews throughout war-torn Europe, Gross and Grudzińska Gross write ironically: "And if one were to ask what a Swiss banker and a Polish peasant had in common (besides that each had an immortal soul), the answer, with only a little bit of exaggeration, could be a golden tooth ripped

19 In Navaro-Yashin's view, both people and things "produce and transmit affect *relationally*"; see Navaro-Yashin, *The Make-Believe Space*, 172.

20 Marcin Zaremba suggests that *szaber* most probably derives from the Hebrew *shaber* [to break] appropriated by the nineteenth century Polish criminal slang to denote breaking in; see Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* [The Great Terror. Poland 1944–1947. People's Response to the Crisis], Cracow 2012, 276–277.

21 Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*, 225–306.

22 Sławomir Buryła, *Tematy (nie)opisane [(Un)Described Subjects]*, Cracow 2013, 156.

23 PMM-B-3015.

from the jaw of a Jewish corpse.”<sup>24</sup> While it would be difficult not to agree with the authors of *Golden Harvest*, an attempt to differentiate between the Swiss and Polish experiences of the appropriation of ‘Holocaust gold’ should nevertheless follow immediately. After all, the social and political context, the proximity to the extermination process and, most importantly, the mechanisms of expropriation have been of crucial importance for both the material and affective afterlives of ‘Holocaust gold’. The (collective) subject position occupied within the framework of the Europe-wide “Holocaust economy” to this day determines the trajectories of travels and the depth of the shadows cast by post-Holocaust objects.

It is unquestionable that the Bełżec-born entrepreneur refers in his letter to the grave-robbery undertaken at the former camp by local villagers searching for gold and other valuables allegedly hidden among and in the human remains. The practice, which developed immediately after the Nazis in authority left Bełżec in early July 1943, following the disposal of the bodies and the dismantling of the camp,<sup>25</sup> was widespread.<sup>26</sup> The accounts collected as early as 1945, the testimonies gathered since 2004 by the employees of the newly established Bełżec museum, and the interviews which I conducted, also affirm this assumption.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, they vividly portray the practices aimed at seizing ‘Jewish gold’: the demolition of built structures remaining at the site of the former camp, the burrowing of the grounds of the camp in search of burial pits, the digging out of corpses to divest them of golden teeth, the sifting of ashes to separate the gold, and prospecting the former camp’s latrine in pursuit of abandoned valuables.

The modes of violence perpetrated against the Bełżec victims, whose property and corpses were also violated at the site of the former extermination centre, were obviously highly problematic from all standpoints (officially) dominant in mid-twentieth-century Poland: moral and religious, legal and political. Even though the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland are far less restrictive with regard to exhumations and the transfer of the dead than Jewish religious laws are, they did not authorise any form of grave desecration, and naturally this extends to grave-robbery. On the contrary, the sanctity of burial sites and cemeteries, as well as the sacred status of the dead body, were well-established cultural convictions, symbolically and affectively structuring the handling of human remains in this highly religious coun-

24 Gross/Grudzińska Gross, *Golden Harvest*, 121.

25 The SS officers immediately reacted to the alarming news from Bełżec by erecting a farmhouse for a *Volksdeutscher* and his family at the former camp in September 1943 as a means to protect its grounds from Polish villagers, but this intervention only temporarily suspended their activity. The looting resumed directly after the escape of the guards in the summer of 1944; see Sara Berger, *Experten der Vernichtung. Das T4-Reinhardt-Netzwerk in den Lagern Bełżec, Sobibor und Treblinka*, Hamburg 2013, 193.

26 Even though the looting of the former camp was not practised or accepted by all members of the local populace, it definitely took on a mass character. Marta Zawodna made a similar observation in her article *On the Clearing of the Post-Camp World*, devoted to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she conceptualised the practice of “digging in the human remains” at the site of the former camp in terms of a “peculiar social order” created by the local populace. Marta Zawodna, *O porządkowaniu poobozowego świata. Sposoby postępowania ze szczątkami ludzkimi na terenach byłego KL Auschwitz-Birkenau od momentu ostatecznej likwidacji obozu do powstania muzeum*, in: *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały [Holocaust. Studies and Materials]*, (2012) 8, 145-175, here 173.

27 I am referring here to the materials from the investigation carried out at Bełżec by the local branch of the Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce [Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland] in 1945–1946, which are available in the archive of the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej [Institute of National Memory in Lublin – furthermore: AIPN Lu], 1/15/105, Akta Śledztwa w sprawie zbrodni popełnionych w obozie zagłady w Bełżcu, 1945–1949 [Records of the Investigations into the Crimes Committed in the Extermination Camp at Bełżec, 1945–1949]. In 2013, those materials were published in Dariusz Libionka (ed.), *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków [The Extermination Camp at Bełżec in the Testimonies of Survivors and Accounts of Polish Witnesses]*, Lublin 2013.

try.<sup>28</sup> The desecration of corpses and burial sites constituted, furthermore, a crime carrying penalties under pre-war criminal law. Additionally, on 13 June 1946, a *Decree on Crimes Particularly Dangerous During the Reconstruction of the State* was passed, which increased the maximum penalty for the profanation of graves from two to five years or, in the case of crimes committed in particularly aggravating circumstances, to ten years of imprisonment.<sup>29</sup> The hegemonic and highly politicised heroic-martyrological narratives about the war that developed in the immediate post-war years and centred around the former Nazi camps – focussing on the ‘anti-fascist’ struggle and leaving ample room for the memory of Jewish suffering<sup>30</sup> – could moreover not have accommodated the controversial practices evolving at Bełżec.

Yet, for many years, the looters continued their prospecting at the site in search of ‘Holocaust gold’ with almost full impunity and one can assume this only led to further corruption. Even the efforts sporadically undertaken by local police to put an end to this practice failed. Resulting to a large extent from the social and political chaos after the war,<sup>31</sup> and the fact that the actions of local police concentrated on fighting the “criminal gangs” recruited from the members of the anti-Communist ‘independence underground’ (active in the region up until the late 1950s),<sup>32</sup> this state of affairs continued for many years. “This situation lasted until the 1950s and even longer, and the raids organised by the Department of Security and the police did not help much”,<sup>33</sup> one interviewee admitted. Another person, who had worked from 1951–1952 in the timber yard partially located at the former camp, recounted: “People were loitering around the site searching the ground [...] for the valuables left by the murdered Jews.”<sup>34</sup> My analysis of the post-war police reports from Bełżec and Tomaszów Lubelski from the years 1944 to 1954 confirms these findings: until the late 1950s, no grave-robber was arrested or brought to trial.<sup>35</sup> The first three Bełżec looters were sentenced in 1959 and 1960.<sup>36</sup>

As a result, for many decades the ‘Holocaust gold’ and ‘formerly Jewish’ possessions were subject to almost unrestricted circulation. The statements given by inhabitants of Bełżec allow us to reconstruct some of their trajectories: “For the money gained through the sale or exchange of valuables people would buy cows and horses – the commodities [sic] most needed in the immediate post-war years.”<sup>37</sup> “Some of the prospectors hoarded the gold for a so-called rainy day or exchanged it for dollars as early as the 1970s.”<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, it was the presence of the ‘independence underground’, said to have been robbing local residents, which imposed temporary constraints on the villagers’ economic activity.

28 Joanna Żac-Bucholc, Śmierć w polskiej kulturze ludowej. Wyobrażenia, obrazy, znaczenia, in: *Racjonalista*, 2002, <http://www.racjonalista.pl/kk.php/t,1883> (20 August 2014).

29 Art. 26, 27, *Dziennik Ustaw z dnia 12 Lipca 1946* [Official Gazette of 12 July 1946]. No. 30, poz. 192.

30 See for instance Zofia Wóycicka, *Arrested Mourning. Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950*, Frankfurt am Main 2013.

31 See Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga*.

32 Archiwum Rady Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa [Archive of The Council for The Protection of the Memory of Struggle in Martyrdom (furthermore: ROPWiM)], 52/5, 7-10; Raport komendanta wojewódzkiej komendy milicji w Lublinie [The Report by the Commander of Regional Police Department in Lublin], 12 February 1962.

33 PMM-B, relacja [testimony] 16, anonymised.

34 Ibid.

35 AIPN Lu 0295/1, 0295/2, 0295/3, 0295/10, 0295/14, 0295/18, 0295/23, 0295/30.

36 Police investigations were also conducted in the early 1960s under the operational cryptonym “Undertakers”; see also Raport komendanta.

37 PMM-B, relacja [testimony] 34, anonymised.

38 PMM-B, relacja [testimony] 16, anonymised.

“For a long time in the area of Brzeziny, a partisan group opposing the government was active. [...] K[...] was the leader of this gang. People were afraid of partisans, which is why the gold found at the site was hidden and not exchanged for money and bills. Only after 1957, when K[...] was captured, safety improved. People started investing gathered valuables in building residences, barns and outhouses.”<sup>39</sup>

An anecdote recounted by one of the informants allows us to imagine the diversity of fates that could actually have befallen the ‘Holocaust gold’ and ‘formerly Jewish objects’:

“Among the inhabitants of Bełżec a story was often told that in the 1970s an elegant car with licence plates from western Poland arrived in front of one of the houses. Two men were inside and one asked the property owner for a spade, and then, before the eyes of the surprised host, without much searching and reflection, he dug out two huge jars full of gold jewels from under the apple-tree growing in the yard. Afterwards, the two gentlemen thanked him for the favour, cleaned soil off the jars, brushed the sand off their hands, said goodbye to the host, and after slamming the car doors shut went on their way.”<sup>40</sup>

Most probably, as the history of the Bełżec ring tentatively suggests, many items taken from the site of the extermination camp changed owners as they travelled along family lines to diverse sites across the country, or until this day they embellish the houses – and the necks – of local inhabitants.

The seamless integration of ‘Holocaust gold’ into the fabric of the daily life of Polish villagers was certainly facilitated by the post-war economies of silence, both bottom-up and top-down, surrounding these controversial practices.<sup>41</sup> The information on grave-robberies perpetrated by Poles on the mass graves of Jews exterminated by the Nazis reached broader audiences on an extremely rare basis, if indeed this ever happened. Already silenced in the official publication of the Centralna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce (Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland),<sup>42</sup> it was discussed neither in local nor in the nationwide press. The first article to touch upon the issue “compromising the dignity of the nation” was the piece by Andrzej Muralczyk, *Bełżec – kopalnia złota. Raport z pustego pola* (Bełżec – A Gold Mine: A Report from an Empty Field), published in 1956 in the all-Poland weekly *Świat* (The World).<sup>43</sup> However, this text also employed a useful argumentative strategy, which for decades predominated in public discourse about the grave-robberies: Focussing on the dreadful character of the deeds perpetrated by the “cemetery hyenas”, as the people looting the extermination camp were called, the journalist almost unequivocally identified them as “degenerates”, consequently framing the looting of the Jewish graves as a marginal and exceptional be-

39 PMM-B, relacja [testimony] 34, anonymised.

40 PMM-B, relacja [testimony] 16, anonymised.

41 In the documentary *Bełżec* (2005), directed by Guillaume Moscovitz, an interviewed inhabitant of Bełżec says bluntly: “No one has really ever talked about that.” Fortunately for my research, this statement is not entirely correct.

42 Eugeniusz Szrojt, *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu*, in: *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce* [Newsletter of the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland], Warsaw 1947, t. 3. For an English translation, see Eugeniusz Szrojt, *Bełżec Extermination Camp*, in: *German Crimes in Poland*, vol. 2, Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, Warsaw 1947.

43 Andrzej Muralczyk, *Bełżec – kopalnia złota. Raport z pustego pola* [Bełżec – A Gold Mine. A Report from an Empty Field], in: *Świat* [The World] (1956) 17, reprinted in Daniel Lis (ed.), *Wokół ‘Złotych Żniw’* [On the ‘Golden Harvest’], Cracow 2011, 49-55.

haviour.<sup>44</sup> But, as the analysed material indicates, this was not necessarily the case: although the grave-robbery most probably did not involve all members of the population living in the vicinity of Bełżec (and, for that matter, all Nazi extermination camps in occupied Poland), it could rightfully be depicted as a “community enterprise”.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, the *szaber* in extermination camps – misappropriation and exchange – laid the foundations for a local post-war economy created from the objects and valuables that had once belonged to the murdered Jews. The ‘post-Jewish gold’ has been appropriated, domesticated and incorporated into new a social order created on and out of the ‘leftovers’ of the war.

Nevertheless, as the letter written by the Bełżec-born entrepreneur suggests, in the long term and on an affective level, this integration must ultimately not have been smooth and unproblematic. The feelings of unease and guilt associated with the possession of an object belonging to the victim of an extermination camp was, in this case, readily apparent. Interestingly, other accounts have also emerged in recent years in which the inhabitants of Bełżec testify to the fact that the material circulation of ‘Holocaust gold’ has, indeed, a powerful if somewhat repressed affective counterpart. Travelling around in the form of rumours and – like in the story of the Bełżec ring – taking the form of ghost stories and uncanny narratives, the emotionally charged accounts throw some light on the shadows cast by ‘post-Jewish’ objects and on the affective dynamics inscribed in the daily interactions with the possessions bought with ‘Holocaust gold’. Taking as a vantage point the question posed by Yael Navaro-Yashin in relation to her Turkish-Cypriot ethnographic material, concerning the affect “generated in a community that has re-created its life and livelihood significantly on the basis of objects and properties belonging to another community”, one could therefore ask what kind of affects cling to the possessions of the ‘other’ stolen from mass graves at the sites of former extermination camps.<sup>46</sup>

In the case study analysed by Navaro-Yashin, life in and among properties “assumed through an act of violation” from the expelled ‘enemy’ has been intrinsically entwined with a deep sense of melancholia (*maraz* in Turkish), which she interpreted as an affect discharged by ruin and left behind by a community which, though absent, has been an unconscious source of grief.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, the accounts given by the inhabitants of Bełżec suggest that their dealings with misappropriated objects have been tinged rather with a sense of fear and vulnerability. Both are easily detectable in a short, seemingly marginal sentence woven into a testimony stemming from 2004: “Rumours proliferated that the animals bought from found [sic] money and valu-

44 Such an interpretation was also omnipresent in the internal documents of the governmental Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa [Council for the Protection of the Memorials of Combat and Martyrdom], on whose initiative the site of the former camp was finally commemorated in 1963. Until very recently, the accounts of grave-robbers’ activities were presented mostly in historical publications and remained largely unknown to the wider public. They were rarely supplemented by efforts to clarify their underlying social dynamics and cultural consequences, or to locate them in a broader political or economic context. The interpretations put forward referred most often to curiosity, greed, total moral degradation, and the fact that the looters “did not perceive their actions in terms of evil”. Therefore, the release in 2011 of Jan Tomasz Gross’s and Irena Grudzińska Gross’s important book *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* not only publicised the problem of looting, but also created space for its critical investigation; the work being devoted, among other topics, to the post-war plunder of the former extermination camps. Most importantly, the book framed the phenomenon of looting not as a marginal behaviour or as an example of social deviance, but as a widespread and commonly accepted social practice.

45 Robert Kuwałek, *Obozy koncentracyjne i ośrodki zagłady jako miejsca pamięci* [Concentration Camps and Extermination Centres as Places of Memory], in: Feliks Tych/Monika Adamczyk-Grabowska (ed.), *Następstwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010* [The Effects of the Extermination of the Jews. Poland 1944–2010], Lublin 2012, 493–525.

46 Navaro-Yashin, *Affective spaces*, 1–18, here 4.

47 Navaro-Yashin, *Affective spaces*, 1–18, here 5.

ables died very quickly.<sup>48</sup> Induced by and inscribed into the recollections of sudden deaths or instances of madness among the most notorious ‘cemetery hyenas’, of the unexpected and severe illnesses suffered by their offspring, or of the general inability to ‘make money’ on the ‘Jewish gold’, the affects surrounding the practices related to the objects taken from the camp give voice to the long repressed, disturbing memories of the violent “economy of leftovers”.<sup>49</sup> The submerged anxiety which accompanies living life at the expense of the brutally murdered and posthumously robbed victims of the camp is experienced as, and translated into, the affectively potent phantasm of the cursed ‘Jewish gold’, unsurprisingly complementary to that of the ‘Jewish gold’ itself.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, by pointing out the fragility of ownership and the precarious nature of the economic order constructed from misappropriated possessions belonging to the dead, the uncanny narratives could be seen as an expression of a belated, semi-reflexive “local moral discourse”.<sup>51</sup> Centred around the problematic dimension of the ‘appropriation’ of the property of the victims of the extermination camp, they are, after all, seen as bringing about the restoration of the sense of justice shaken by the grave-robbery.

Yet another way in which we could direct our thinking about the affective afterlives of the objects stolen from the former camp is strongly indicated by the discursive persistence of the phrase “post-Jewish valuables and gold”. In this regard, the analysis proposed by Navaro-Yashin again reveals itself as informative: just as the Turkish-Cypriots to this very day refer to the properties acquired after the war of 1974 as ‘Greek’, the Polish villagers personify and nationalise the loot by attributing to it the quality of ‘(post)-Jewishness’. This obstinate and largely unthinking practice in both cases maintains and carries on the relationship between the misappropriated objects and the people to whom they once belonged. It is through the objects left behind by the Greek-Cypriots, Navaro-Yashin claims, that the Turkish-Cypriots “relate to the other community in their absence”.<sup>52</sup> Simultaneously, one could argue, by the same token this absence is also paradoxically removed. The immediacy of the ‘post-Jewish’ object, after all, testifies to the lingering, haunting, long repressed ‘presence’ of the radically dehumanised ‘other’ clinging to and affectively marking his or her former belongings.

However, from this perspective, a certain ambivalence attaches itself to the prefix ‘post’. While sustaining the affective dynamics of haunting and repression, it nevertheless suggests that the latter enjoys greater prominence. For it carries the morally justifiable implication that the death of the former owner results in a suspension of his or her ownership rights – “As if the murdered Jews left their possessions for Poles to inherit,” to quote from Piotr Forecki’s short interpretation of this problematic notion.<sup>53</sup> Based on a similar transferral of guilt as that inscribed in the workings of the ‘economy of leftovers’, the phrase ‘post-Jewish property’ again relegates the responsibility to the ‘other’, stripping the violent practice of robbing mass graves of its criminal and morally unacceptable content. Interestingly, the aftertones of this dubious

48 PMM-B, relacja [testimony] 34, anonymised.

49 Information provided by an employee of the Museum – Memorial Site at Belzec. Interviews conducted by the author, 16 October 2013 and 24 September 2014.

50 For an in-depth interpretation of the myth of the “(cursed) Jewish gold” in Polish post-war literary works, see Buryła, *Tematy (nie)opisane*.

51 Navaro-Yashin, *Affective Spaces*, 1-18, here 3.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Piotr Forecki, *Nasze mienie ‘pożydowskie’* [Our ‘post-Jewish’ property], *Dziennik opinii* [Opinion Daily], 14 December 2014, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/historia/20141214/forecki-nasze-mienie-pozydowskie> (16 December 2014).

logic still resonate in the letter written by the Belzec-born entrepreneur. Reflecting on the affect discharged by the ring, which used to belong to a young Jewish girl “who had been cruelly deprived of her life”, he fails to address the circumstances in which she was cruelly deprived of her personal belongings. Unsurprisingly then, the two sentences “Why did she choose me? I feel relieved” perfectly capture the parameters of affective afterlives befallen to ‘formerly Jewish’ objects misappropriated from the former extermination camp – they speak volumes about both the burden of guilt and the power of repression entwined in the possession of an object once belonging to an anonymous victim of the Holocaust.

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