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Noc żywych Żydów [*Night of the Living Jews*] by Igor Ostachowicz – Judaic and Shoah Topoi

Abstract: The first scholar who tried to categorise Judaic topoi in Polish literature was Władysław Panas. He pointed out a tripartite division of texts: the written Torah (Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Old Testament), spoken Torah (Talmud and post-rabbinic literature) and Kabbalah, all of which are known as a common treasury of images and a common cultural code containing an extensive corpus of topoi. This order was changed dramatically by the Shoah, which does not belong to the Judaic topoi, but constitutes new modern Jewish topoi. The first scholar who tried to systematise these new topoi was Sławomir Buryła. The article attempts to describe the presence of Shoah topoi in contemporary Polish literature (after 2000), using the example of Igor Ostachowicz's prose (*Noc żywych Żydów* [*Night of the Living Jews*], 2012).

Keywords: topoi, post-Shoah, memory, contemporary Polish literature, Judaism

SOURCES OF TOPOI AND CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

“A tripartite collection of texts constitutes both the basic source for and a compendium of Judaic *topoi*: the written Torah (the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Old Testament), the spoken Torah (the Talmud and post-rabbinic literature) and the Kabbalah,” Władysław Panas wrote, stressing that these texts, known as a common treasury of images and a common cultural code, contain an extensive corpus of topoi which are characterised by their “‘short duration’ and low repeatability” (Panas 1995: 1096). The topoi penetrate literary texts and are manifested in them through the artistic imagination of their authors (based, in turn, on a strong cultural foundation). Examples of such topoi include: *the Sages of the Talmud*, *Law, the Quarrel with God* (Talmudic topoi), *Book-Authentic*, *Light*, *Angels* (Kabbalistic topoi), *Eretz Israel*, *the Shtetl*, *the Golem* (topoi stemming from Jewish Tradition) or *Ahasver– the Wandering Jew* (Anti-Semitic topoi) (Panas 1995: 1097–1103). It is possible to add another collec-

tion of topoi, such as: *the Messiah*, *the Jewish mother*, *the Jewish child*, *the Tzaddik* etc. To put the matter simply, it can be claimed that the literary fantasies of Jewish writers, regardless of the language in which they wrote their works (Hebrew, Yiddish or Polish) (cf. Panas 1995: 1097–1103) or their ideological declarations (religious or secular), were based on a collection of sacred images expressed in a language. A great part of these topoi became the common heritage of Christians and Jews, and eventually entered the universal heritage of civilization. That is why Panas argued that thanks to the wide presence of the Bible in culture we do not speak about separate topoi – Jewish and Christian – but about one group: Judeo-Christian (Panas 1995: 1096), within which there are Talmudic and Kabbalistic topoi (often deformed). The latter found its place there through European philosophy (mainly personalism and the philosophy of dialogue), for their creators were Jewish thinkers; and through Jewish folklore (Frankism and Hasidism), which marked Polish culture with its presence through the Romantic fascinations of Polish authors.

This situation was changed dramatically by the Shoah. Panas notes that this tragic event could be classified as a new source of Judaic topoi, but the problem was reduced by him to a few basic tropes, loosely ordered. These include: *the Old Doctor* (Janusz Korczak), *the Merry-go-round in the ghetto*, *Dead poets* and *Absence* (Panas 1995: 1103–1104). Later, he briefly added that the Shoah “from the beginning [showed] a great tendency to conventionalize, and to be expressed by means of traditional clichés, stereotypes and topoi well embedded in European culture” (Panas 1995: 1103).

It seems difficult to agree with the above opinion. The Holocaust does not belong to Judaic topoi, but constitutes a new source of topoi which, in a sense, fills “empty spaces,” i.e. areas of experience inexpressible by means of strictly religious components of the imagination used up to that moment (cf. Tomczok 2015; Wolski 2012; Buryła (2) 2016). After the Shoah, Judaic sources still have an influence, but they have been reinterpreted in connection with Shoah topoi. This situation was accurately described by Sławomir Buryła:

In their confrontation with the Shoah, motifs and images fundamental for the West have been transformed and modified. A new area of interpretation has been established, one connected with the original paradigm, but which at the same time, introduces new contexts initiated by the extermination of the Chosen People. (Buryła 2016 (2): 5; this and other translations from Polish into English by S.J.Ż.)

In the article cited above, i.e. *Topika Holokaustu* [Holocaust topoi], the scholar named fifty-four tropes which, according to him, are basic to these topoi. Buryła then added for the record: “[a]s can be easily noticed, the list of topoi can be divided into three large groups constituting extensive semantic fields. These include: the GHETTO, the LAGER, and LIFE ON THE ARYAN SIDE” (2016: 53).

An attempt to describe and systematize images of the Holocaust in Polish culture (from World War II until now) has recently been made by scholars from the Research Group for Shoah Remembrance in the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw. The results of their exploration have been published in the monograph *Ślady Holokaustu w imaginarium kultury polskiej* [Traces of the Holocaust in the Polish Cultural Imaginary] (cf. Kowalska-Leder [et al.] 2017). They understand the category of “imaginary,” following the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, as the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they adapt to others, the expectations they usually fulfil, and the deeper normative concepts and underlying images. This imaginary contains a common understanding of many cultural signs, enabling common practices and the emergence of a sense of legitimacy shared by broad social groups (Kowalska-Leder [et al.] 2017: 14–15).

According to Kowalska-Leder et al., there is an “amorphous and inconsistent set of ideas [...] about the Shoah” (15) in culture, which is indicated by “traces of the Holocaust” belonging “to a common set of representations” that direct one “to the same imaginarium,” despite their various manifestations (16). The monograph describes whole sets of “discursive, performative and visual signs which, on the one hand, refer to the Shoah, and, on the other hand, are connected with everyday life” (17). These signs functioned before the Shoah but today, “polluted” by the Shoah, they function as part of that cruel reality. The authors emphasise the fact that this catalogue of images does not include “all linguistic and visual signs connoting the Shoah after the war” (17)¹ in culture, language and literature. Buryła considers the same phenomenon to be visible especially in the recent contemporary Polish writing:

For some time, we can observe a new situation in literature on the Shoah. Ever more frequently, witnesses’ accounts are replaced by texts whose authors are people born after the war. Increasingly, Auschwitz and the Holocaust have also become (more or less justified) metaphors used to diagnose contemporary reality. The Holocaust found its semantic replacement in the name of Auschwitz. [...] Inevitably, we enter a post-memory space which is an attempt at reaching Shoah trauma for people born after the tragic events (usually members of the so-called second and third generation) who have access to them only by means of existing cultural representations of the Hecatombe. (2016: 79)

As a result, in the creative fantasy of contemporary writers there are topoi (manifested in many ways in their literary works) which do not come from the existential experience or thorough the historical knowledge of those writers, but which are borrowed from both high and popular culture. In my article, I want to also address other topoi used in the artistic practice of Polish authors of the second and the third generation writing about Shoah

¹ “[...] some traces currently pointing to the genocide of the Jews for years have been read mainly as signs of the suffering of Poles” (Kowalska-Leder [et al.] 2017: 19).

which have not been named by Panas, Buryła or the scholars from the Warsaw research group. Using the findings of their predecessors and accepting the synonymous character of the terms “topoi” and “image,” I propose other, more specific terms, the first one being: “Miejsce-po-getcie” [The place after the former ghetto²] to describe Muranów – a contemporary district of Warsaw. Such a term underlines the integral unity of historical and contemporary space. The second and third terms are: “Miejsce-po-aryjskiej-stronie” [Place after the former Aryan side], “Miejsce-po-lagrze” [Place after a former camp]. These three basic categories are complemented by follow-up terms: “Antysemita/Neonaziści” [Anti-Semites/Neo-Nazis], “Zdevaluowane wartości” [Devaluated values], “Pokolenia post-Shoah” [Post-Shoah generations], “Muranów”, “Pogrom”, “Sprawiedliwi” [the Righteous], “Trauma Zagłady” [Shoah trauma], “Walka o pamięć” [Battle for memory], “Żywe trupy/ żydowskie zombie” [Living dead/ Jewish zombies].

In this article, the category of topoi (cf. Curtius: 1977) will be understood as motifs manifested in literary texts. For many scholars this remains an interesting subject of research exploration in the theory of literature (cf. Górczyńska 2011; Johnston, Rouse, Schmidt-Biggemann 2018; Jancsó 2019). Shoah topoi are images which frequently use and remould old Judaic topoi, though some take on completely new meanings because of emerging existential experiences of this modern Jewish tragedy (cf. Kowalska-Leder 2016; Wolski 2016; Kuczyńska-Koschany 2016; Buryła 2016; Tomczok 2016; Budzik 2016; more about Judaic and Holocaust topoi in article written in Polish: Żurek S.J. 2019). All of this terminology (above) will be used in my analysis of the novel *Noc żywych Żydów* [Night of the Living Jews] by Igor Ostachowicz, although this phenomenon is also seen in other contemporary Polish prose on the Holocaust³. Ostachowicz’s text, however, is one of the best examples of the accumulation of these topoi.

1. JEWISH DEATH DURING THE SHOAH

Places of Jewish extermination in Poland include Nazi death camps (among others, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bełżec, Kulmhof, Sobibór, and Treblinka), concentration camps (among others, Auschwitz I, Majdanek, Kraków-Płaszów, and Stutthof), forced labour camps (among others, Bliżyn, or Trawniki), ghettos (among others, in Warsaw, Łódź, and Kraków), and places on the so-called Aryan side: fields, forests, and exposed hiding places. The Shoah is a source

² The term “former ghetto” was created by Jacek Leociak (cf. Engelking, Leociak 2001; Leociak 2009).

³ Cf. Keff 2008, Bart 2008, Tulli 2006, Tulli 2011, Tulli 2014, Bieńczyk 2007, Piwowarski 2012, Rakusa 2008, Sieniewicz 2005, Paziński 2009, Kłós 2015, Chomątowska 2012, Masada 2016, Chutnik 2014.

of new cultural topoi of the so-called “Jewish death” (in contrast with Polish or Aryan death) (cf. H. Grynberg: 1994). In the ghettos, the funeral ritual was abandoned, and in cemeteries (and in other places outside the ghetto, as well) graves were frequently collective and unnamed. During mass-extirminations in concentration and death camps, the Nazis additionally introduced the ancient practice (forbidden in Judaism) of burning corpses. To make this procedure possible, they installed special crematory furnaces.

Jewish people slated for death by Nazi law (or rather lawlessness) were already dead bodies during their lifetime because being a Jew was a death sentence in itself. One only had to wait (calmly, resigned to one’s fate, or while attempting to overcome increasingly difficult challenges, as at least some had hopes for survival) for the sentence to be carried out. Many photographs from that time, especially from the last phase of the functioning of the ghettos, as well as pictures taken by the liberating armies in camps after the Germans had left, show emaciated skin-covered skeletons. This image has become an icon of the Jew during the Shoah, although starvation was just one of the ways used to carry out the aforementioned sentence. During the Holocaust, some six million Jews were murdered, including about one and a half million Jewish children. In the mentality of those who survived, Poland became a cemetery. The ashes that remain here (also in the literal sense, see, for example, the mausoleum in the Majdanek State Museum in Lublin) symbolize the absence (and former presence) of Jews in this land. Today’s citizens of Warsaw, Łódź or Lublin live in the area of a peculiar palimpsest: they live where Jews were formerly settled: in houses built on the ruins of Jewish buildings (often with the remains of their inhabitants inside); they play soccer in stadiums with grass covering burial places. The same is true for the playgrounds where their children play, parks, supermarkets, office centres or highways – under many of them are hidden traces of annihilated Jewish people.

In this context, a very interesting phenomenon observed in Polish culture in recent decades is the attitude of younger generations to the Shoah – “a renaissance in popular culture in interest in the motif of the ‘living dead,’” which succours a new wave of means of settling accounts with the Shoah” (Kowalska-Leder [et al.] 2017: 116).

2. BATTLE FOR MEMORY – NEW POST-SHOAH TOPOI

One way this interest in the Shoah is manifested is in the publication of works on the Holocaust that are not historiographic in character. More than one hundred books on the subject have been published in Poland since the year 2000. It seems that the innovative cultural notions and descriptions contained in them cumulate old Judaic topoi and images from the Holocaust, creating new topoi-images/ideas. Let us trace how they function in one pop-culture novel:

Noc żywych Żydów by Ostachowicz, an author who was born more than twenty years after the Holocaust. In this work we can observe the original use of many new Shoah motifs in dialogue with Judaism and the Jewish tradition. In it, all traditional literary conventions are broken; the novel represents the best example of the application of subversion and transgression in Polish prose fiction on the Holocaust (cf. Kasperk, Żurek 2019).

2.1. LIVING DEAD - JEWISH ZOMBIES

Ostachowicz's work describes the coming back to life of Polish Jews, Shoah victims ("Living dead/ Jewish zombies") who leave the world of the dead ("The place after the former ghetto") and enter the world of the living ("The place after the former Aryan side") in the twenty-first century. Among these and other images (mentioned in brackets above and below), the transfigured topoi of the "Righteous" appear time and again. They are represented by the main protagonist who, thanks to an imagined stay in Auschwitz ("Former camp"), begins to understand what the Holocaust was at its core ("Shoah trauma") and what kinds of consequences are visible today ("Devaluation of values"). He hence sacrifices his life fighting ("Battle for memory") with contemporary Anti-Semites and Neo-Nazis. His sacrifice can serve as a means of addressing the mentality and awareness of contemporary people ("Second/Third generation"), to inform them about what happened during the Holocaust and to forward the message to the next generations.

The Jews in *Night of the Living Jews* are referred to by means of "Living dead/Jewish zombies" topoi (cf. Szlachetka 2013: 129–132). The Jew is "a ghost from a tunnel in the basement" (58), "a creature" (71), a "Jewish corpse," "a revenant," "a Jewish nightmare" (92–93), or a "real corpse" (183). The problem of their (meta)physical presence concerns above all Warsaw, referred to in the novel as a town of "gold seekers," "gold teeth" and "silver spoons" (7) as a consequence of what some Poles did after the Holocaust on the territories formerly inhabited by Jews. Muranów – the part of Warsaw where before World War Two the city's Jewish district was located, and during the occupation, the Jewish ghetto – is where the majority of the plot takes place. However, one of the protagonists prophetically says that soon the phenomenon of Jewish corpses rising from their graves may spread to the entire territory of Poland (184).

The main protagonist of the book, a tiler, learns about the zombies in the basement of the block where he lives (precisely in Muranów). The first time he hears about their presence is from his girlfriend Chuda ("Skinny"), who is fascinated by mysterious sounds: "Wait, she put her ear to the floor, 'somebody or something is scraping, can you hear that?'. I couldn't hear it. 'There are Jews living here, underground'" (7). The second time he has to deal with them personally is when they open up a mysterious hatchway, which, as it turns out, leads to another world. The tiler-narrator describes this moment in the following way:

It is the silence of those who are there, those who start moving in the darkness. We can hear them more and more clearly. It is not a single scraping. It is **the crack of straightening bones** [emphasis mine, here and in following quotations – S.J.Ż]. Characters stumble and fall on one another, some already **straightened**, others bent in half, they scratch and grate, moving closer and closer. (35–36)

What can be observed here is an updating of the topoi of living corpses based on a vision from the Book of Ezekiel⁴, mentioned earlier in this article, which has become a source of this novel.

We can see these connotations more clearly in subsequent fragments of the novel. The Biblical prophet emphasizes that the resurrected people formed an army. In Ostachowicz's novel the creatures who wriggle out of the place of their "vegetation," i.e. from the wreckage of the demolished Jewish district, also do so in order to form troops to fight "pure" Aryans, i.e. the Neo-Nazis in the Arkadia [Arcadia] shopping centre, which also exists in the world outside the literary text (it is located in the area of the former ghetto).

How did the Warsaw created in the novel become, in its foundations, a town of living dead who had been wandering in the underworld of Muranów for decades? One of the Jewish zombies explains the situation in the following way: "Almost all normal people went to Heaven a long time ago. These corpses walking under the city are all madmen [...]" (63). In the case of Rachel, the corpse of a fourteen-year-old girl who is one of the important protagonists in the novel, the reason why she cannot be in Heaven is her permanent sadness, because "there [in heaven], before you enter, you should smile" (87). People "living" underground in Warsaw are those

[...] who are not quite OK, most of them are in shock. They can't pull themselves together. Some of those who resent God don't want to make a step ahead. Some others are afraid, to my horror, of understanding everything, or, even worse, that they will have to forgive. There are some people who worked in the police or the Sonderkommando, and they have other reasons. Anyway, all the people have got stuck. They are waiting for time to pass, but after death time goes by differently. (87)

After a few descents into (the literal) "underground" of his block, the tiler can see that it is "a necropolis, the capital of dead bodies. Powązki is a big town in comparison with this place" (80). The presence of Jews in this basement has a double meaning: it is both historical and culturally symbolic. It is historical because the basement (or cellar) was frequently a hiding place for Jews during

⁴ [...] there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and **the bones came together, bone to its bone**. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. [...] and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army" Ez 37, 7c–8.10b.

the war (both on the Aryan side and in the ghetto); in the latter meaning, the cellar, basement and foundation are cultural elements of the palimpsest of the formerly multi-ethnic capital of Poland. And what remains of it after the Shoah?

First bulldozers, then construction workers worked here. New districts of blocs were established, so many years of communism, the poor people of the PRL lived here, libations, 'westerns' after the news, simple sex and non-depilated legs, the calm sleep of pensioners and retired people, dinners with no spices, underwear hanging on the balcony. (11–12)

In Ostachowicz's grotesque vision, the narrator is astonished by the words of his girlfriend: "[a]re they scratching the floor from underneath? But the Germans killed them a long time ago. So how can they still be scratching?" (11). But then he comes to the conclusion that this is because:

[...] the evil cannot be covered with debris and soil. The suffering needs to be respected and settled; and blood, if it's not cleaned in time and is allowed to sink into the ground, mixes with clay and comes out one day as a horde of golems slow as tanks; and the broken bones and battered bodies will dress in the rags that were not stolen from them; they will rig themselves up into two-legged nightmares by means of under-biology; they will know only pain and they will share this pain, running from door to door among our peaceful flats. (14)

All these divagations are accompanied by a metaphysical conviction that there is another dimension of existence, a sphere where people live on after death, but on different terms. With regard to Judaic topoi, Ostachowicz's text makes a cultural reference to the mythical Sheol, the place where, according to the Biblical tradition, the dead await the coming of the Messiah, who will free them (these images also found their place in the Greek Bible, i.e. the Gospel story about the death and resurrection of Christ and His going to the underworld).

Initially, these Jewish apparitions fill the narrator with fear, and when he has to stand face-to-face with them, he panics:

"Just don't touch me!" I tried to whisper and squinted my eyes. "Aaah..." He pushed me, or rather just lightly touched me, pecked with hard, spiked fingers. I fell down, I felt soft ground under my hands and animal fear in my stomach. (54–55)

The Tiler does not want to touch the corpses because he simply abhors them. However, with every passing minute he begins to get used to their strange presence and interacts with them:

"Turn off the flashlight," I hear a teenager's voice say.
Instead of turning it off, I try to direct the light on her; somebody kicks my hand.

“Turn it off!”, a man’s voice is not joking [...] I turn off the light.
[...] I turn on the flashlight. Both are covering their faces with their hands.
“Your light’s too bright! Come in here, it’s better.”

They enter a niche in the corridor which I hadn’t noticed before. She must have tripped me up from there. A small hollowed cavern in the ground. Maybe ‘cavern’ is too big a word for it, it is rather a little cubby-hole in the ground. Surprisingly, there is a bulb dangling from the ceiling; the girl pulls the chain and a light turns on. What disgusting people! He is terribly emaciated, more or less my height, in a tattered trench coat; he looks unfriendly; she has a nice face, an extremely sad one; she is wearing a light overcoat with a torn-off sleeve. Only after a while, when my eyes have got used to the light, I notice that their skin and body, my gosh, are like from a horror movie. I am about to ask: “What are you? Dead or something?” I do not ask, however. Somehow it feels stupid. (56–57)

In the end, the protagonist gets so used to their appearance that he invites Rachel, whom he met in the cellar, and her father, a fighter from the ghetto named Capitan O. (who has the “empty eyes of a shark-avenger,” 100) to his flat. And then he can see her “heavy, moisture-soaked clothing”, which “was dirty with soil in many places and smelled very badly,” “a dress that was once blue, but is now rather grey with a distant memory of blue”, her hair-do is “a bunch of tangled hairs” (60). When Chuda asks Rachel: “[p]erhaps you would like to have a bath?”, she answers: “[c]orpses don’t bathe” (60). An encounter in the underground with yet another character causes the tiler to “feel like throwing up [...] out of horror” (72), which seems to be justified once the reader knows what he has seen and heard:

[...] that bastard raises his head slowly and opens his eyes. He has empty eye sockets under his eyelids. He is voraciously moving his nostrils, inhaling my fragrance. When he opens his mouth, I can see an ulcerous stump of a tongue.
[...] He begins to howl, he is howling like a wolf. (72)

Every Jewish zombie is defective in some ways, for instance, David “lacks [...] part of his face” (112). The scale of these deformities proves to be shocking when “a dozen dead kids stand” before the tiler. They are “in different states: [...] some of them are severely gnawed by the teeth of time, a few of them are well preserved, everybody is dirty with soil” (117). These features do not prevent them from going to the Shopping Centre and settling there comfortably. Two of the zombies, Szymek and Aaron, quickly come up with the idea of “cashiers’ races” and “accept real money bets” (212), which leads to the tragicomic unification of Jews and Poles who, “[...] alive and dead, young and old, are obsessed with gambling” (215). They dream about winning the highest stakes. All of these textual creations resemble golems, artificial creatures, as if directly transferred from medieval treatises on Kabbalah practices.

The tiler wanders with Rachel through the “Aryan” streets of contemporary Warsaw.⁵ Everyone stares at “her light overcoat, dirty with soil, at her antiquated shoes and tights” (73). The protagonist-narrator in this text is constantly troubled with the fear that if someone asks him why he is walking with a “Jewish corpse straight from the grave among living Aryans straight from the front of a TV set. Who gave you the right?” (73), he will not be able to answer.

Judaic and Shoah topoi overlap here. They are accompanied by the pop-culture convention in which the entire novel is maintained. Ostachowicz consciously uses elements of farce, burlesque and horror to enhance the effect of the reader’s shock. Chuda is in despair: “I was in the ghetto,” she sobbed rhythmically,” and the tiler comments half-seriously: “[i]t’s strange,” I thought, pulling the face of a Scooby Doo protagonist, when I was there, only a heap of debris was left of the ghetto, and the Warsaw Uprising was probably going on” (49). After a few days of staying in twenty-century Warsaw, the Jewish corpse of Rachel begins to look “very modern,” as noticed by the narrator. Then, he observes the adequacy of her dress to the situation: “the skulls and blacks” fit with her “graveyard origin, and the infantile roses and glitters with her young age” (98–99). The girl-zombie adapts to the surrounding reality, and even though her dead head had “lost much of its hair,” she decides to have a hair-do typical of the youth, as well as fashionable nails, because you cannot “scare people” with ugly nails (99–100).

Jews who come out of the war ghetto “to the Aryan side” of contemporary times move, as was mentioned above, to the Arkadia shopping centre, where they will fight with Anti-Semites. During a peculiar “march of the zombies,” a procession of “Jewish corpses” (179) along John Paul II Avenue in Warsaw, there are initially, as reported by the narrator, “more or less as many living passers-by as dead ones” (162), but due to the presence of the latter, the situation changes:

We were passing more dead people than living ones. [...] Now the living people felt uncomfortable, swiftly passing through, as if rain or plum-sized hail was falling down from the sky; they tried not to look sideways and get to work or home as soon as possible. These were the places where you could take a deep breath among the living. (176–177)

⁵ A similar motif, i.e. a contemporary man wandering with a Jewish girl from the time of the Holocaust through a modern Aryan city, also appears in other prose realizations, for instance in *Fabryka muchołapek* by Andrzej Bart: “[n]ext to the pedestrian crossing, among the girls waiting for the traffic light to change, there is a girl in woollen socks, a warm skirt and a green jacket. A nice girl, one would say, with an ecological face. She holds a board with densely printed letters like a blessed candle. An extremely long request is the obvious association, but after a while, the brain acknowledges the frequently repeated family name of the Rumkowski [the chairman of the Judenrat in the Lodz ghetto – S.J.Ż.]. During the first time in the real world, I already felt uncomfortable, let alone now as I paraded around the city with a girl from the ghetto” (241–242).

Images of Jewish zombies become a literary farce and a grotesque realization of a stereotypical anti-Semitic vision of the eternally living Jews, even after the Shoah. Bożena Keff writes in her text, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie*:

Although the Jews were killed, they are always alive; they have such power that they multiply dead. There are many districts built on their remains, churches erected on their bones as well as blocks, roadways and parks; the whole city of Warsaw is built on Jewish ashes. And who asked them to decompose here!? (2008: 32)

What is the real goal of all these postmodernist visions? What is their aim?

2.2. JEWISH AMULET IN THE HANDS OF ANTI-SEMITES

A significant element of the plot involves a very small, mysterious and influential silver heart:

[...] an artefact that defended Jews from persecutions. When they had it, they were received with hospitality and treated well, but when they lost it, they did poorly, and often lost a lot, because someone always finally figured out what was going on and stole it from them to gain power. [...] The heart disappeared in the debris. (157)

The magical talisman is found by the tiler, and from that very moment a personified demon with the code name KZ (“Ktoś Zły” – “Someone Evil”) wants to take the trinket away from him. The creature turns into ZZ (“Zupełnie Zły” – “Totally Evil”). He needs the talisman to “solve the problem of wandering corpses definitively! (230), i.e. to trigger “the night of the living Jews!” (230), a Jewish uprising, which can be suppressed and which will allow for the removal of all the murdered Jews from human memory once and for all. ZZ is an anti-Semite, which he demonstrates in his speeches, for example: “[w]hich insult is the most horrible? Crypto-communists? Crypto-gays? I know. CRYPTO-JEWS! This is a trace, this is my way to power, I must disclose these Jewish corpses” (116). He delivers a hate speech which spreads contemporary anti-Judaic stereotypes: “Jewish demons spread diseases, or not, better not directly, better: all over Warsaw there have been numerous mysterious disappearances of young children” (116–117). The silver heart gets into the hands of the demon, and as a result “[...] during this one night of the year” the dead Jews become “really alive for a few hours” (228–229). And, as they report: “[...] this night carries a great danger with it, because if we are alive, we can be killed. This time, forever. If you kill a corpse during this night, it disappears from the world in the past, in the future and in the present” (228–229).

The “silver artefact,” on the one hand, is a reference to the custom of using amulets for protecting one from an evil eye, widespread in Kabbalah practice,

and, on the other hand, it is a characteristic element of pop-culture, postmodernist fairy tales in which different magic items play a significant role. In Ostachowicz's work the uprising begins as a result of the talisman's power. Neo-Nazis, demons and average residents of Warsaw (Aryans) take up the fight against the Jews. The battle for the memory of the Shoah begins.

2.3. RIGHTEOUS ONE OR ARYAN MESSIAH?

Using the language of the Shoah, the tiler is Aryan. He recalls: "my deceased daddy was an anti-Semite, not to mention what I learned in the cradle" (153). To everyone's surprise, the tiler becomes the leader of the Jewish zombies and becomes their non-Jewish Redeemer. Is there a connection between this protagonist and Judaic topoi? Can it be considered a manifestation of the topoi of the "Righteous One" who saves Jews from annihilation, or is it a transformed topoi of the "Messiah"?

In the Jewish tradition, the "Righteous One" [Hebr. *tzaddik*] is a category with very broad cultural implications. They live in every generation and thanks to them all people in the world, despite their many sins, still exist. However, the "Righteous One" does not explicitly reveal himself or herself, he or she cannot be unambiguously identified. The *tzaddik* neither has to be a Jew nor practice any religion, because he is in ontic unity with God, and that is why piety is unnecessary (see more: Leoni:1998). Jewish mystics are convinced that the *tzaddik* comes from *olam ha-ba* [Hebr. "the world to come"], and although he participates in the temporal order, his soul is immersed in eternity.

Kabbalah turned this thread into the idea of the Messiah from the Tribe of Joseph (the Patriarch Joseph was considered the personification of justice), whose incarnation in every generation prepares the world for the final appearance of the Messiah from the 'House of David.' According to some concepts, when the world is ready for salvation, the unknown righteous one will be revealed as the 'Son of David.' (Doktor 2003: 246)

He is also referred to as *tzaddik ummot ha-olam* [Righteous among the Nations], which denotes an attitude or a situation in which the suffering of the chosen people becomes one's suffering, the martyrdom of the chosen people becomes part of his or her personal pain. At the same time, their joy becomes the *tzaddik's* happiness (this concept underlies the idea of the Yad Vashem Memorial Institute in Jerusalem and their awarding of the highest Israeli civilian distinction to people who helped Jews survive during the Holocaust, often sacrificing their own and their relatives' lives). The *tzaddik* is in touch with the souls of innocent Jewish victims, and he demands the whole of humanity to remember them.

The second very important category which can be helpful in further observations on the reality of the text is the Messiah [Hebr. *mashiah* means

– ‘anointed’]. In the Biblical tradition this word was primarily used for Israeli kings anointed by priests and descending from David’s line. The etymology of the word “Messiah” simultaneously binds two people: a king and a priest, because both functions were connected with the reception of orders. In the beliefs of ancient Israel, the Messiah also contained two ontic aspects: political and ethical (physical), and rational and universalist (spiritual). Jan Doktor clarified the messianic issue in the eschatological context by saying:

The following sequence of ultimate events was widely expected: 1. a catastrophe preceding the onset of salvation called *hevlei ha-Messiah* (Hebr. ‘Messiah’s labour pains’); 2. the anointment of the Messiah by the Prophet Elijah; 3. recognition of the God of Israel by other people; 4. war with the opponents of salvation; 5. the coming of the Messianic Kingdom; 6. [the establishment of] the Future World (Hebr. *olam ha-ba*). However, it was a purely theoretical sequence whose task was to reconcile the divergent motifs of messianic ideas: politics and restoration (return from exile and rebuilding the kingdom of David), as well as spiritual and utopian motifs (a future world which was usually imagined as, at least, a return to the condition of Paradise; paradise). (2003: 141)

According to the Judaic tradition, after the Messiah’s coming the resurrection of the body will take place, followed by the Final Judgment. The Righteous One will establish a new world order [Hebr. *olam ha-ba*] by the Messiah’s side, in which there will be no evil. Man will be freed from his dark side [Hebr. *sitraahra*]. The Jewish tradition includes both a personal Messiah (as a person in Biblical and Talmudic sources) and a non-personal one (Kabbalistic sources).

Fighting for the memory of Polish Jews, Holocaust victims, the tiler fights for “cell memory,” which preserved “the survival reflex deep in the mitochondria” (104). Before this happens, the tiler must undergo a metamorphosis in his relation to the Jews. He becomes, as he puts it, “a helper of the Jewish corpses” (98), and many pages later he asserts with horror “[...] I am a Jewish fucking defender, shame on me, really” (230). But already after one of the subsequent descents to the basement, he states: “It’s stupid, but I feel quite at ease in this basement, [...] I meet some dead people, they greet me, pat me on the back, shake my hand, I have found myself some company” (188). A turning point for the protagonist arrives when he moves, in an oneiric vision, to Auschwitz during the Holocaust. There, he realizes the tragic fate of the Jews even before they were murdered: the planned deprivation of humanity by the Nazis and reducing people to feeling like animals. This shocking discovery does not allow him to live normally anymore. Addressing the imaginary figure of his father, he states: “I will not be a Jew, Dad, but I will be dead anyway, and I do not know why I feel this way more and more” (238).

The tiler is a “Jewish warrior” (he begins to think of himself as one); he is the “chosen-one” (as the Jewish zombies call him, using a modern youth slang

word describing someone important who is “number one” in a community), a hero solving “all the problems of the dead” (165). Hence, in the face of the upcoming fight, he mounts “a huge yellow tipping truck” (238) like a horse and rushes towards Arkadia, where anti-Semites have gathered on the square in front of the shopping centre with the aim of storming the building that “burst at the seams with dead people of the Mosaic religion” (215):

I'm not losing speed, entering the roundabout. The crowd is in front of me, I cannot estimate the crowd, it looks like a reasonable-sized concert, so there must be up to five thousand people, not like for a big star, but for a good concert. I step on the accelerator, and I do not use the horn at all. I drive into them. Even if they can hear or see me, they have nowhere to run. I'm wreaking havoc. Now, I'm jumping a little bit in the cab, there are too many bodies. I turn back, I'm making an eight. They are running away, trampling one another like animals. Now, I pull the string and give a signal like a cheerful driver of a smiling steam engine. A few eights more and the square is mine. I'm watching if someone is moving somewhere. If they move, I drive up and run over the lamer. (238–239)

The tiler seems to be a modernized figure of the Messiah who fights Gog and Magog, mythical characters who are the “embodiment of Israel's enemy forces,” but he is hidden (like the tzaddik) behind a camouflage of superficiality: the protagonist of the novel is steeped in pop culture. In seemingly momentous moments of overcoming the crowd of anti-Semites, he is pleased to say “cool,” just like the protagonists of his favourite American cartoon “Beavis and Butt-Head” (238). And when he is victorious in commanding the army of Jews in Arkadia, he concludes without any deeper reflection: “I stand there, nodding and imagining myself as the protagonist of the film *Home alone 14: Kevin's adult life*” (241). In the supermarket, he observes the “situation on the monitoring screens” and gives orders “via intercom. Like some commander at Wizna,” and he adds delighted: “Cooool” (232). Then, he shouts into the microphone: “Run! Take your positions. Guard the escalators at Leroy Merlin and those AGD” (232). The description of this battle scene is grotesque:

[...] and there's a battle in full swing, ours throw everything from upstairs, shoot with bows, yell and scream, the opponents are surprised on the escalator, they expected that it would be easy, that it would be just like unloading a transport, they smashed the glass door, our barricades and then easy-peasy, but there's a surprise: instead of abusing someone, you have to run away with an arrow in your ass or a nail in your eye. I took a free hammer, I threw it like a tomahawk. I did not hit, but it was close, it bounced back from the shiny stone floor. They retreat from the staircase to the car park.
 “Refill your ammo” I shout like commanders do.
 “What a bummer!” One of the dead girls shakes her head disapprovingly. “They ran away immediately.”

“Don’t worry, they’ll come back,” I say using the poetics of commanding jokes and put my hand on her shoulder. (242)

Looking at the Jews resurrected in his basement and successful on the battlefield, the protagonist begins to wonder about the (lack of) presence of Jews in the Polish landscape and about how much they are missed today: “I am standing with my mouth open, looking at all of them. ‘Fuck, they are living Jews,’ I say. Finally, I can see them” (243). In the end, the protagonist dies, a moment for which he is prepared by a gradually increasing awareness of his mission: “[p]erhaps I really am the chosen-one” (159). “A grand finale” or “a great victory” is how he describes, after his death, the moments in which he managed to defeat “himself, the devil, the Germans and his own nation” (250). In the end, he adds self-ironically: “I feel wonderful, I look around looking for the rest of them, I have a question in my head about what the life of a hero will look like, what laurels, prizes and eulogies the world will come up with” (250).

The last chapter of the novel is a metaphysical one. The Cleaner makes the tiler aware of his death, and the latter tries to find out if his sacrifice was necessary, and whether his death “counts as some merit or is only some hallucination for his private use.” The answer: “The Judgment will confirm” raises anxiety in him. He does not know what judgment the Cleaner is talking about, and then he hears the answer: “The Final Judgment” (252–253). Is this a topical reference to eschatology common to both Christians and Jews, which explains something at the end of the novel? Or is it perhaps an attempt to lead an interpreter of the text to the messianic topoi? Would the tiler’s surprise reach its apogee if it turned out that the expected judge is the tiler himself? All of these questions remain unanswered.

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Ostachowicz’s novel does not provide definite answers. There is content hidden under its grotesque character whose meaning demands deciphering. After all, humorous descriptions act in two ways: by making us laugh, they soften the tragedy, but at the same time they emphasize it. The pop-cultural convention used here reinterprets the Judeo-Christian and Holocaust topoi and may be a contribution to the struggle for memory of the Shoah victims. It can also serve to express a postmodern joke, be mere clownery. And the same thing should be looked for in other such texts, including in terms of the use of the topoi mentioned above: showing how contemporary Polish literature on the Shoah not only uses old Judaic topoi, but updates them, processing them, and tracing out a new sense for them from old meanings and new experiences.

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