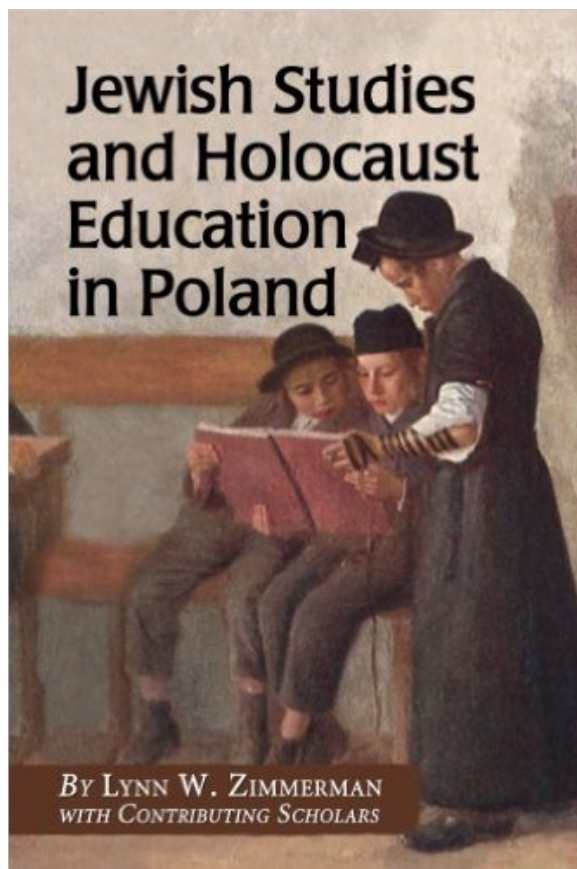


Book Review

Holocaust Education and Jewish Identity in Modern Poland

“Jewish Studies and Holocaust Education in Poland” by Lynn W. Zimmerman with Contributing Scholars

By Colin Everett



Among the interesting facts about Poland is that it is home to one of Europe's largest Jewish festivals. Like most of the Jewish cultural festivals in Poland, the country's biggest, held in Krakow, was largely created, maintained, and attended by non-Jews. A combination of factors has led to this fascination with Jewish culture in Poland. For some Poles, it is a sincere desire to

connect with the past, for others a search for the authentic as well as a curiosity from a generation who grew up in the Holocaust's shadow, but never learned much about it under communist rule. In addition to cultural festivals, Poles learn about Jewish identity and the Holocaust through a variety of experiences, including museums and schooling. The aim of *Jewish Studies and Holocaust Education in Poland* is to better understand this context by which Poles learn about and comprehend both Jewish identity and the Holocaust in Poland.

Author Lynne Zimmerman and her seven contributors take a consistent approach, first introducing the reader to a concept, and then putting that concept into the context of the Holocaust or Jewish Studies in Poland. Over the course of eight chapters, the authors lay a foundation for the modern conception of the Holocaust in Poland and then explore the different methods by which Poles understand Jewish identity and the Holocaust.

Zimmerman begins with a chapter on culture, identity, and stereotypes. This chapter essentially delivers what it promises, providing a background on the concepts of culture and identity, and how stereotypes are shaped by a dominant culture and how it impacts minority cultures in a country. This section could be skipped by most college-educated readers, particularly those with a background in the social sciences. However, it would be helpful as

an introduction to these concepts for undergraduates and those approaching the subject for the first time.

The historical context chapter provides an excellent six-page summary of Polish history. For the author, the Poles possess a collectivist culture, the strongest binding elements of which are the Polish language and Catholicism. Even though Poland had the largest pre-WWII population of Jews in Europe, Jews never fully integrated into Polish culture, which the author describes as “one of insider-outsider and of contending with the lure of and/or demands of assimilation” (30). Jews’ political status has also been fluid throughout Polish history. Jews at times maintained their own parliament, but in general, as the strength of the Polish state waned in the eighteenth century, the status and rights of Jews also declined.

The status of Jewish identity and the Holocaust in communist-era Poland is a fascinating subject. During the decades of communist rule in Poland, the Holocaust was de-Judaized and the emphasis was placed on framing the Nazi crimes as a war or struggle over fascism. In this period, the government never denied that most of the Holocaust’s victims were Jews, but neither did they emphasize the place of Jews in this horrific event. A good example of this is the Polish parliament’s dedication of Auschwitz, during which politicians stated that the site should be preserved “for all times as a Monument to the Martyrdom of the Polish nation and other nations” (95). Jews were part of the “other nations.” During the era of communist rule, Polish universities removed their theology departments. Instruction in Hebrew and Yiddish declined, and Jewish studies were marginalized and subsequently forgotten. Holocaust studies that did occur during this time pertaining to Poland occurred abroad in places like England, Israel, and North America.

Throughout the Communist era, school textbooks taught that only the criminal element in Poland cooperated with the Nazi occupation. Among the major efforts of NGOs and Holocaust education programs in Poland is the teaching of the Holocaust in Polish schools. In perhaps one of the most powerful letters ever written by a school principal, Holocaust survivor Chaim Ginott summarizes what would become the motto of the Polish Holocaust curriculum:

Dear Teachers:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become more human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, or educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human (93).

Holocaust education in public schools emerged in the late 1990s and was incorporated into state sponsored textbooks in 2003, finally becoming a distinct subject in 2009.

Other sections of the book deal with the role that cultural festivals, museums, and other non-governmental organizations play in shaping the understanding of Jewish identity and the Holocaust in Poland. One fascinating section, written by a young Jewish student in Poland, discusses the view that Jews are a novelty in Poland. Most Poles do not know any Jews, since they are a tiny minority in Poland today. As a

result, the image of Jews in Poland is laden with stereotypes and misconceptions.

Jewish studies and Holocaust education in Polish universities have expanded greatly since the collapse of communism. Holocaust studies in Poland are a new subject that did not develop as a separate academic discipline as it did in Western Europe and North America. Most of the academic study of the Holocaust and Jewish studies are all fairly recently established and contain the familiar practices of conferences, institutes, and curricula for schoolteachers, academic journals, and publishing.

Jewish Studies and Holocaust Education in Poland is organized into short, well-written chapters. As is often the nature of such edited collections, it can sometimes feel as if each chapter is a distinct, although related, piece of the larger book. The historical background is frequently repeated in multiple chapters. This material could have been better edited to reduce repetitive background information and context and/or moved to the historical context chapter located earlier in the book. Multiple authors also draw comparisons between Holocaust education and Jewish studies in Poland and North America and Western Europe. These comparisons are helpful and interesting, but it would have perhaps been more intriguing to see how Holocaust education in Poland compares with other former Warsaw Bloc countries.

Overall, this was an interesting book that would be ideal for Holocaust studies classes, students learning about the role of culture and education, and students of modern Polish history.

About the Author

Lynn W. Zimmerman is a professor of education/applied linguistics at Purdue University and Tischner European University in Krakow, Poland.

About the Reviewer

Colin Everett, Ed.D., is a public high school teacher in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts and a history instructor at Cape Cod Community College.

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