



Gratz Insider, November 2016 - Story Continuation

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Remembering Polish Jews

At the beginning of October, I spent nine days in Warsaw at the invitation of the new [POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews](#). I gave three talks: one to the museum staff, one to a group of Jewish studies doctoral students and one to the public. The public lecture was about the intense popularity of S. Anski's play "The Dybbuk" in its Yiddish version before World War II, and in its Polish version in post-Holocaust and post-communist Poland. This lecture attracted an audience of well over 200 people, many of them young. It's worth thinking about what this kind of interest means.

Anski's "Dybbuk" premiered in Warsaw nearly a century ago, where it created enormous excitement among Polish Jews, went on to become the most popular play in the history of Yiddish theater, was subsequently staged in a dozen languages and inspired numerous movies, an opera and a ballet. It is the tale of two young lovers, separated by death, who overcome all obstacles to reunite. The spirit of the young groom, in the form of what was known in Jewish folklore as a *dybbuk*, returns from the netherworld to repossess the body and spirit of his bride. What I addressed in my lecture was why it is that while the word *dybbuk* means nothing today to Americans or American Jews or Israelis, it still resonates powerfully in present-day Poland.

The notion of a wandering Jewish spirit emerging in Poland after the Holocaust is a trope for what is known as memory work, the revival of interest in "things Jewish" that has swept Poland over the last several decades. In 1939, Jews made up 10% of the Polish population, 30% of the population of the largest cities and over half the population of many towns. The resulting absence is everpresent, visceral to some. While actual Jewish communities have gradually begun to emerge in Poland, memory work initiatives by non-Jewish Poles have proliferated. Local efforts to restore synagogues and Jewish cemeteries abound, while major institutions of memory work include the annual Jewish culture festival in Krakow - the largest Jewish music festival in the world, now in its 25th year - and of course, the museum where I spoke, which is not a Holocaust museum, but a museum dedicated to a millennium of Jewish life in the Polish lands.

But darkness trails the wandering *dybbuk* as well. Polish historians have begun to illuminate so-called dark corners of the Polish past, which are essential to the authentic restoration of memory. This includes, alongside the memory of the thousands of Poles who risked and sometimes sacrificed their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust, the memory of the massacre of 600 Jews by their Polish neighbors in the town of Jedwabne in 1941. In 2001, the president of Poland apologized for this atrocity in the name of the Polish people. Over the intervening years, historians have brought to light other instances of Polish collaboration with the Nazis in the murder of Jews. But the nationalist Polish government that came to power a year ago has resisted all such initiatives. Under the slogan of making Poles proud of themselves again, this government, ironically, just like the communist government that

wielded power until 1989, lavishes attention on the Poles who saved Jews, while denying that Poles had ever done anything to be ashamed of, that their actions had been anything other than heroic. Sadly, it is this new version of history that will now be taught in Polish schools.

Meanwhile the *dybbuk* continues on its path through Polish contemporary culture. New versions of the play are continually staged, and not just in Warsaw and Kraków, but in a host of smaller places. *Dybbuks* keep reappearing in films, and the word itself has entered the everyday Polish lexicon. It appears in the titles of Polish books, throughout the Internet and in popular music. We can imagine the *dybbuk* today laboriously making its way through expanding thickets, through forests of officially mandated amnesia, instrumental in the ongoing Polish struggle for the memory of its lost Jews.

Dr. Steinlauf is the director of the [Holocaust and Genocide Studies program](#) at Gratz College. This program serves the needs of educators, religious and lay leaders, community and museum professionals, and adult learners interested in personal enrichment. Students in the program have the option of earning either a master's degree or a graduate certificate; both of which can be completed entirely online. For more information, contact program coordinator Mindy Blechman at mblechman@gratz.edu or at 215-635-7300, x154.