

# SHOAH

## IN POLAND

*Shoah* entered the public sphere at a somewhat precarious moment, in the midst of a massive shift towards remembrance working itself through the challenge of self-critical reappraisal.

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fter the first screenings of *Shoah* in France, early in 1985, the Polish government lodged an official protest against the offensive portrayal of Poles in the film. Yet in November of the same year, Polish television presented a selection of "Polish sequences" from *Shoah*, followed by a studio discussion, while the film itself was released in theatres of major cities. For several months, both before and after the screening of *Shoah*, the major weeklies carried articles dealing with various aspects of the film and its production. Yet it was not until early 1987 that the key questions posed by *Shoah* — about the holocaust and about Polish attitudes — became a focus of serious debate in independent Catholic press. And that debate was not in response to Claude Lanzmann but to reflections by a Polish literary critic on two poems written by Czeslaw Milosz.<sup>1</sup> *Shoah* was meant to challenge Polish and Catholic conscience. It did not. How could so powerful of a "text" be neutralised?

The response of Polish intellectuals to *Shoah* was not uniformly shallow or defensive.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the tone of official comments about the film especially in the

Party weekly *Polityka* and especially before the decision to bring the film to Poland would be finalised, was serious and reflective. In marked contrast to just a few years back, when Polish readers were consistently and not-too-subtly told of an anti-Polish obsession in the west, exemplified by such works as the television series *Holocaust* or the book *Sophie's Choice*, now they were told to listen to Lanzmann's critical voice. And while all the previously attacked pieces of "anti-Polishness" were never made available in the country, *Shoah* was to be actually seen.

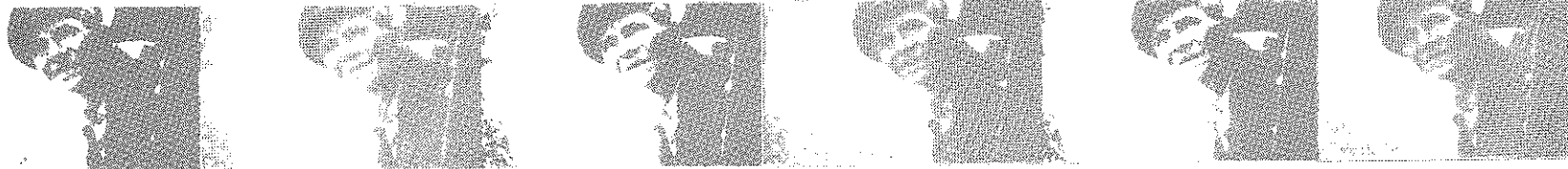
The change of heart on the part of the officialdom — from vigorous protest to an equally vigorous encouragement of self-critical reflection — in itself calls for an explanation. It is also what may partly explain the impact, or lack thereof, of *Shoah*.

Lanzmann himself<sup>3</sup> suggests that the government's invitation followed a realisation that the Poles portrayed in *Shoah*, mostly peasants and small town people, were Catholics, not communists. Indeed, the film carries no direct negative references to the regime whatsoever; indirectly, some of Lanzmann's questions about the improved lot of peasants after the war, as well as the very fact that he shot so much of his footage in Poland, with the help of an officially assigned and highly visible interpreter, could serve as a testimony to the regime's goodwill. Most importantly, perhaps, *Shoah* is an explicit condemnation of Catholic anti-Semitism, of Church teachings and Church action.

Polish communists, in a continuous ideological battle with the Polish Church, have tried — unsuccessfully — to expose the Church's prewar record of siding with the extreme nationalists. The most spectacular of their recent defeats came only two years before, when calls for resignation of the government spokesperson, Jerzy Urban, followed his remarks about Father Maksymilian Kolbe, a recently canonised priest. Father Kolbe died in Auschwitz, sacrificing his life for that of a fellow Pole; before the war, though, he was behind publication of one of the most viciously anti-Semitic Catholic journals. Urban's voice, despite the support from then prime minister Rakowski and *Polityka* (where both worked before joining the government), was silenced with public outrage.

Urban's voice was heard again, in the spring of 1985, in defence of bringing *Shoah* to Poland. Whether he was actually instrumental in the regime's decision to do that does not quite matter. In the public's eye, Urban, the "court Jew," was again attacking the Church.

Beyond the very presentation of *Shoah*, the officialdom's support of the film was by no means unanimous. In the press, there appeared numerous articles criticising Lanzmann for his "manipulative methods" and for his lack of balance and objectivity. In *Polityka*, which published extended versions of the televised arguments following the screening of parts of *Shoah*, there was much heated debate. Of all the voices in that debate who defended



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Lanzmann's critique, only one belonged to a non-Jew.

This particular combination of a mixed-yet-favourable official response and the country's "court Jews'" sharp (if at arm's length) criticism of Polish Catholicism made *Shoah* into yet another instrument of ideological warfare. [According to one of my Warsaw informants, the tone of many a conversation surrounding *Shoah* was indeed that of combat, of witnessing from a distance another "battle" between the regime and the Church.]

Though the "Jewish dimension" of this attack on the Church was very much played down in its immediate reference to Poland's "court Jews," no such care was taken in respect to Claude Lanzmann himself. Ever since the publication of Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* in 1965, the theme of Jewish hostility towards Poles has been widely exploited in the Polish media. Given prominence during the 1968/69 anti-Semitic campaign, the idea that influential Jews engaged in slander of Poland's good name would remain on the public agenda for many years.<sup>4</sup> Its strength went well beyond the official propaganda; key emigré journals spoke in similar tones. What made the situation different in 1985 was a radical turn-about on the part of the regime in its stance towards the Jews. Instead of attacking, the regime decided to court them, beginning with an elaborate commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1983. In the midst of a grave political and economic crisis, following the crushing of Solidarity, great care was taken in coordinating special exhibits, book publications and overall media coverage, not only of the Jews' heroic struggles in Warsaw, but of Poland's Jewish heritage in general. The show of good will, calculated as it might have been to gain international credibility — and credit — points for the regime, did open the gates to a veritable deluge of public discourse about things Jewish, much of it originating in independent Catholic circles.

When *Shoah* appeared, Polish readers were already exposed to an unprecedented amount of discussion of Jewish history and culture, both inside and outside of the official sphere. Again, the discourse was not uniformly "pro-Jewish;" there were elements of naivety, ignorance, cynicism, as well as hostility and apprehension. But by and large, this was the first time in the long history of Polish-Jewish relations that the Jew would become worthy of knowledge and respect as a Jew.<sup>5</sup>

Yet as much as Poland's Jewish heritage was gradually being reclaimed as a part of Poland's history and memory, and as much as the subject of Polish-Jewish relations was no longer taboo, a more open discussion of anti-Semitism was then barely beginning. *Shoah* would enter the public sphere at a somewhat precarious moment, in the midst of a massive shift towards remembrance working itself through the challenge of self-critical reappraisal. Potentially,

Lanzmann's voice could have precipitated a serious examination of anti-Semitism; such indeed was the explicit aim of the official welcome. But Lanzmann's voice came too early, too strongly — and it was too Jewish.

The task of self-criticism, of coming to terms with the dark chapters of one's past, is always difficult. It is especially difficult when at the very base of collective identity is the idea of victimisation, and Poles indeed see themselves as victims of history in general, and of the Nazis in particular. To break through this interpretive grid, to point to times and places where Poles had been the *agents* of victimisation, has proven difficult for Polish intellectuals, working from within the traditional views of history. To impose a radically different interpretation from without — as did Lanzmann — had the effect of reminding Poles just how isolated is their sense of the recent past.

The result might still have been a form of re-evaluation rather than entrenchment, were it not for Lanzmann's particular critique of Christianity. In western writings on the holocaust, the subject of Christian responsibility for the destruction of the Jews is widely discussed, both in its concrete dimension of the Churches' inaction and in its symbolic one, of the role of Christianity in promoting anti-Semitism. In *Shoah*, the complexity of this discussion disappears, together with its by now strong roots in the Christian self-re-evaluation. The only argument (and person) presented by Lanzmann is Raul Hilberg's thesis on the inevitable progression from the tenets of Christian teachings on the Jew to murdering the Jews. This radical interpretation is not framed as such; rather, it is supported in the film by scenes shot close to a church, a Polish church. The issue of Christian responsibility thus becomes reduced to that of the influence of Catholicism on the Poles' indifference to the fate of the Jews.

Such a reduction, legitimate as it may be artistically, became the key sore point for Polish interpreters of *Shoah*. In particular, it enraged the senior of progressive Catholics, Jerzy Turowicz, chief editor of the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*,<sup>6</sup> with a long record of condemning anti-Semitism. Not only was the thesis of prevalent indifference among the Poles unacceptable to him (and to most Poles today), the connecting of whatever attitudes Poles exhibited during the holocaust to the position taken by the Church before the war would be declared inadmissible. Turowicz implicitly granted that the Church before 1939 had been largely anti-Semitic, as he spoke of the recent improvements. But he vehemently denied any links between the situation during the war and that before the war, as if sensing that adopting any other view would have meant an acknowledgement of Lanzmann's critique. And, to support his position, Turowicz emphasised the help extended to Jews by Catholic nuns

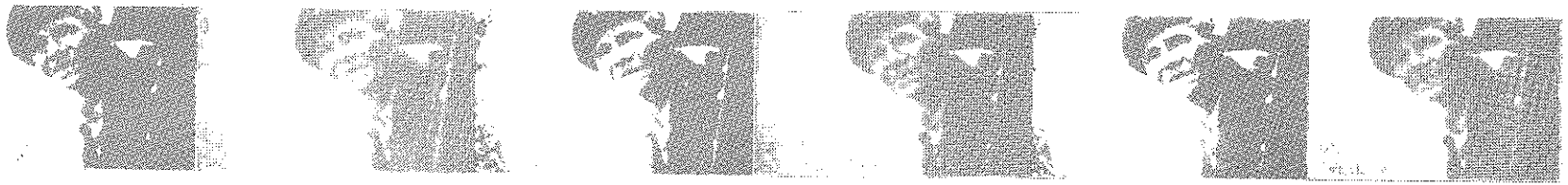
and priests, as well as lay people well known for their anti-Semitic stance.

Turowicz's comments are worth reflecting on, for a number of reasons. First, they carried authority unequalled by any of the statements originating in the official circles. Secondly, they represented the best and most open of Polish Catholicism, the intellectual rather than the dogmatic approach to history.

Thirdly, though, this was an approach replicating the prevailing ideas about "responsibility" from right across the political and cultural spectrum, the reference solely to individual action, to concrete "facts and figures" from the historical sheet. [The much broader notion of a shared *moral* responsibility for the fate of the Jews, the notion motivating so many western critiques of Christianity, has been virtually absent from Polish discourse on the holocaust.] Focus on these facts and figures indeed allows for a defence of the Church's record, as there is no doubt many Jews had been saved thanks to Catholics' efforts. What it does not allow for is precisely the argument that Lanzmann was making; the symbolic, mythic dimension of Catholic teachings dissolves.

Finally, the separation, so insisted upon, between the war period and all that preceded (and followed) is also representative of a sense of history shared in Poland. The time of the Nazi occupation, and especially what happened to the Jews, was the time marked by the Nazi terror, Nazi rules and regulations, Nazi control, in short. Poles as victims of the same regime cannot be held accountable for the fate of other victims; it is Nazis and Nazis alone who were responsible for the "Final Solution."

Without immersing ourselves in a debate over the historical plausibility of this view of Poles as totally helpless victims, it is important to note what results from it — clean conscience. And indeed, the viewers' response to the television screening of *Shoah*<sup>7</sup> indicated that for most of them the question of responsibility for the fate of the Jews was a non-issue. Most of them also thought that Lanzmann's treatment of the "Polish question" in the film was intentionally biased and offensive. In the absence of *Shoah* in the media (now also including Polish emigré publications), the emphasis was on countering this widely perceived bias rather than on the issue of moral responsibility itself. [In that respect, Turowicz's article was one of the rare instances of addressing balance and objectivity in approaching Polish-Jewish relations, critics of Lanzmann brought forth several "corrective factors" to counter the biases of his vision. Most prominent was the emphasis on the film's silence about those Poles who had in fact saved Jews. The picture of societal indifference, it was argued, was very much a partial one, as it did not include the other side. The established version of Polish-Jewish relations during the holocaust — that some Poles behaved badly, while others acted heroically, as in



any human collectivity under duress — was thus rather easily re-established for the viewers of *Shoah*. Lanzmann may not have invented the morally problematic, but he had exaggerated its overall significance.

Jan Karski, interviewed in the film about his mission as an underground courier to the west and thus being the key “redeeming” personality in Lanzmann’s portrayal of Poles, went on public record with a related complaint.<sup>8</sup> He too objected to the invisibility of Polish aid to the Jews, but more specifically, when speaking of his own appearance, Karski attacked Lanzmann for editing out those sections of the interview which addressed the issue of indifference in the west. In the film, he argued, Poles were being unjustifiably singled out, while historically, it was the Allies who bore the blame for not trying to rescue the Jews. Once again, Poles were being reassured in their vision of history, with the underground forces emerging as uniquely concerned about the Jews and helpless at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

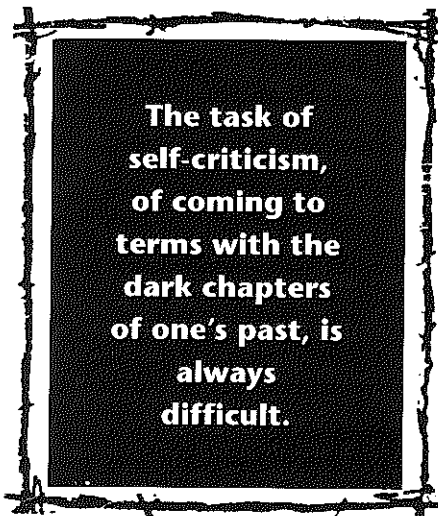
The quest for balance to *Shoah* went, however, well beyond what we might see as legitimate complaints, given the film itself. On the still morally safe side, Polish critics would raise the question of French anti-Semitism. Why was Lanzmann, a French Jew, so preoccupied with Poles, when his fellow countrymen deserved an even harsher treatment, the critics asked, as they described in extensive detail the role of Vichy during the war.

Most prominent, though, and not so morally innocent, were references to the Jews’ own historical record vis-à-vis the Poles. Somewhat oblique in the Catholic press (which was, after all, subject to government censorship), and very explicit in the monthly *Kultura*, originating in Paris, was the call to reciprocate Lanzmann’s attack with reminders of the role Jewish communists had played in the apparatus of Stalinist oppression. Conveniently excluding Polish communists, the image of ruthless Jews torturing innocent Poles resonated well with a much older idea — the identification of communism itself with Jews. In this way, the historical accounting was extended, too, with Jews being blamed for Poland’s loss of independence after 1944. If the key to this morbid balance sheet of victims remained in the Stalinist era, the background of long-lasting support of Jews of the much hated Soviet system offered additional strength to the moral outrage directed at Lanzmann. In a sense, history repeated itself; early during the war, reports from the east, picturing Jews as welcoming Soviet invasion and collaborating in repression of Poles were a crucial factor behind the rise of anti-Semitic sentiments on the territories occupied by the Germans.

It seems that we have moved far indeed from *Shoah* itself. The remarkable feature of the discussion around the film was, in fact, its quality of “aroundness.” Very few critics commented on *Shoah* as a work on

the holocaust. Relatively few viewers indeed saw *Shoah* in its totality; the film was screened in early December in studio theatres, drawing modest audiences (early December is traditionally the busiest shopping season, in a country where shopping is a major, time-consuming chore). The large television audience, presented with one hour and a half of “Polish segments” had little, if any resources for making sense of the whole. Lanzmann’s “message,” reduced to a frontal attack on Poles and Catholicism generated debate, but Lanzmann’s filmic version of the “Final Solution” did not generate reflection.

The editing of *Shoah*, both in the immediate sense of the television screening, and in the larger sense of media coverage, made a more general reflection difficult. But ultimately, it was the long-established pattern of holocaust remembrance which



made such reflection impossible. Lanzmann asked his viewers to think through the machinery of total destruction, to follow him on a quest to understand how was it all possible. But he also asked a very concrete question — “why the Jews?” In Poland, where the three million Jewish dead are routinely joined with three million Polish victims, and where the Nazi project is usually seen as interrupted by defeat before the extermination of the Poles, that key question of “why the Jews?” has rarely been asked. Even when solemnly commemorating the dead in Treblinka, with visitors from the west and from Israel in 1983, the very word “Jew” was not spoken. This sense of uniqueness of the holocaust, so much at the base of *Shoah*, is not a part of Poland’s memory. [More precisely, it was not there when the film was shown; since 1985, the place accorded to Jewish victims has become more of a contested terrain, as witnessed in the recent controversy around the convent in Auschwitz.]

If Poles, in their sense of co-victims of the Nazi genocide, do not raise the general question “why the Jews?,” Polish historians, in their accounts of long centuries of Polish-Jewish coexistence, provide a detailed answer to the local query about anti-Semitism. In a way, the question “why the Jews?” dissolves again as the roots of anti-

Semitism in Poland are all explainable and explained. The overall thrust of this explanation is one of sociological inevitability — given the country’s conditions, given the foreign influences, given the Jews’ separatedness, given ..., there *had* to arise anti-Jewish sentiments. For different historical periods, the sociological givens change, of course; the strength, though, of this scientific interpretation never diminishes. The mythical elements are vaguely acknowledged (in discussions of stereotypes, for example), but the core to understanding anti-Semitism remains within the economic, political and sociological spheres. Reflection on the public *image* of the Jew is then very much secondary to that on his public presence. And, as the persistent references to the “Jewish question” testify, it is the Jewish presence itself which guarantees there be a problem.

Lanzmann’s intense questioning of the symbolic texture of anti-Semitism, with its emphasis on the role of Catholic teachings, was thus doubly outside the established frame of reference for discussing Polish-Jewish relations. An alien perspective coming from an alien, especially an alien declared as hostile, could only be rejected.

The neutralisation of *Shoah*, as we have seen, meant primarily that traditional ways of thinking about Jews and Poland’s history would be re-established, despite, or perhaps because Lanzmann’s vision challenged them so strongly. [The politics implicated in the debate helped to do that too, with the regime’s using the film to criticise the Church.] The arguments were not subtle, the lines of defence remained, for the most part, well defined. Yet, on another level, neutralising *Shoah* assumed a more complex form of an ongoing historical construction, a project which Lanzmann’s voice could have irreparably damaged but did not.

At issue here is the premise of traumatization, the idea that the destruction of Poland’s Jews represented a great loss for the country as a whole. The whole recent recovery of Poland’s Jewish heritage rests on that premise; explicitly stated or implied in the efforts of remembrance are regret and nostalgic longing over a world never to be again. Among many young people in particular, who grew up in a virtually “purely Polish”<sup>10</sup> Poland, there is a very real sense of loss of diversity, sometimes translating itself into reading up on Chassidism, at other times, into avid defence of the rights of the Ukrainian minority. The current interest in things Jewish, at least in its most popular forms, reflects this sense of loss as it focuses on the “authentic” Jew. All in all, the comments, the declarations, the editorials make this feeling of loss appear perfectly “natural,” with the passage of 40 years serving as an additional index for the depth of the trauma.

*Shoah* undermines the “naturalness” of traumatization to a degree never before encountered by Polish audiences. Lanzmann himself, when discussing the film a



few years later,<sup>11</sup> explained some of the artistic choices with a description of his traumatic realisation, on site, that Treblinka is (and was) a village like any other village. Talking to people who had witnessed, from so very close, the "Final Solution" acquired an almost impulsive quality for the director. He was not prepared, he said, for how ordinary life would be, next to the gas chambers and after the gas chambers.

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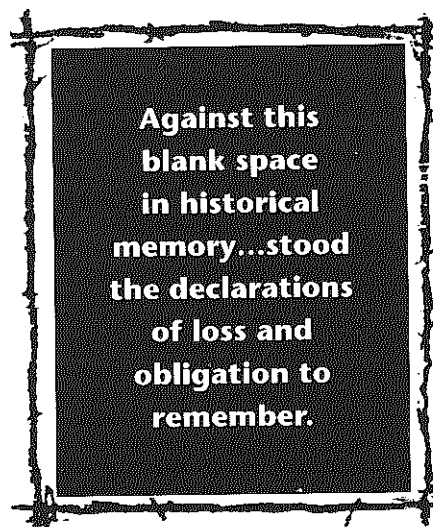
In the west, where the record of post-war years is relatively well known, where "Kielce" symbolises the anti-Jewish violence which had claimed several hundred victims and resulted in massive emigration of survivors, Lanzmann's portrait of Poles served to reconfirm the already negative image. But in Poland itself, a film which made no direct reference to the random killings or the pogroms, while speaking of indifference, almost had to appear biased and unconvincing. Of all the acts of violence against the Jews during the years immediately following the holocaust, only the Kielce pogrom (which claimed 41 lives) became subject to public discussion during the 1987 "opening" by Solidarity. Even when commemorated, though, the victims of Kielce remained alone. The pogrom was a "deplorable incident," often blamed on politically-motivated provocation. Its remembrance became an occasion for condemning anti-Semitism by all the presently competing forces, but especially by the Church. It did not become an occasion for exposing anti-Semitism within the Church at the time, nor for exposing the degree of anti-Semitism within the Church at the time, nor for exposing the degree of anti-Jewish violence. For Poles, however well-intentioned, the history of those, the darkest years in Polish Jewish past, was not on record. Even when issues of conscience were being raised, these were questions about attitudes and actions during the holocaust. The fact that survivors, upon their return, met so often with open hostility, that their death would be taken for granted for quite some time after the Nazis were gone — in short, the indices of non-trauma of the holocaust — were ignored.

Against this blank space in historical memory, and very much in the foreground of the rediscovery of Poland's Jewish heritage, stood the declarations of loss and obligation to remember. The long delay in talking about the Jews, if reflected on at all, would be ascribed to the regime-imposed silence; alternatively, the enormity of the trauma would serve as an explanation. Plausible and morally comforting, these readings of the past gained strength, ironically, from the vision of shared victimis-

ation we discussed before. The idea that Jews represented Polish losses is a powerful gloss indeed to the realities of murders of survivors by ordinary Poles in villages and towns across the country.

*Shoah* which spoke of the climate but not of the violence, could not challenge this comfortable view of the post-holocaust years. Indirectly, in fact, Lanzmann's focus on the memorials in Auschwitz and Treblinka could offer support for the premise of traumatisation. Treblinka's is a moving monument to Jewish victims; in Auschwitz, it was Lanzmann who remained silent about the exclusion of the very word "Jew" from the commemorative tablets. Once again, it was the filmic text and its Polish "readers" together working to neutralise the potentially strong moral challenge of *Shoah*.

With an artistic vision as complex and



complete as that of Lanzmann, there is an analytical temptation towards a form of interpretive closure. *Shoah* indeed became subject to numerous studies and reflections, going beyond the aesthetic to history itself. Building upon the text is a perfectly legitimate and often illuminating strategy for a better understanding of the moral issues it raises. Yet, as I aimed to show here, the posing of moral challenge cannot be treated as a given, internal to the film. On the other hand, *Shoah's* failure, in Poland, to serve as a challenge, cannot be dismissed with a patronising "what else is new." Lanzmann's text, as any text, contains possibilities for interpretations radically different from the intended one. *Shoah's* viewers, as any "readers," bring with them their own ideas about the past and the present. Poland's government, as any other cultural "gatekeeper," had the ability to frame *Shoah* as an instrument of ideological combat. Such framing alone, however, cannot account for the general inability, among Polish intellectuals, to respond to the film with self-critical reflection. Rather, it was the text itself, both where it spoke the loudest and where it remained silent, which facilitated the placing of *Shoah* within the existing structures of Poland's collective memory. In this case, at least, the cognitive and emotional im-

prints shared among the "readers" proved powerful enough to disarm the artist and his vision.

More than a year after *Shoah* was screened and discussed, Polish-Jewish relations during the holocaust were again subject to public debate, this time strictly within the "family" of independent Catholic intellectuals. That debate, too, saw its share of defensiveness and refusal to feel morally challenged; it too did not touch on the key question of postwar violence against the Jews. It did, though, alter the image of the past by stressing the uniqueness of the holocaust.

Considering the timing, the absence of any direct references to *Shoah* was remarkable. On the other hand, the very opening of the discussion consisted of a thoughtful commentary on the negative opinions about Poles as expressed by western Jews, in effect, of an appeal for an effort to understand rather than reject them. Lanzmann's views, so much a part of the perceived "anti-Polonism," were thus granted the status of an intellectual challenge just as the complexity of his vision disappeared behind the familiar label.

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#### NOTES

1. See Jan Blonski, "Biedni Polacy patrzy na getto," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Jan. 11, 1987.
2. For a detailed analysis of the media coverage of *Shoah* in the context of recent shifts in attitudes towards the Jew, see Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books (1989).
3. Quoted in Salem Alaton, "A powerful and grim portrait of death," *The Globe and Mail*, June 13, 1986.
4. The August 26, 1989 speech by Cardinal Giemp is only the most publicised example of its prevalence and persistence.
5. During the interwar period, Jewish themes, while very prominent on the public agenda, revolved largely around the proposed "solutions" to the "Jewish problem," thus prohibiting any form of neutral interest in Jewish culture or history.
6. See the debate between Turowicz and Timothy Garton Ash, *The New York Review of Books*, May 8, 1986.
7. Joanna Skoczylas, "Telewizyjne hity," *Przegląd Tygodniowy*, no. 11 (207), 1986.
8. Jan Karski, Letter to the editor, *Kultura*, no. 3/450 (1985), p. 170.
9. For an excellent analysis of the exclusion of the Jews from the civic society during the war, see David Engel, *In the Shadow of Auschwitz: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.
10. Ethnic minorities account today (accurate numbers not being available) for about five percent of the general population. The estimated number of Jews is at most 15,000.
11. Presentation at the Oxford conference "Remembering for the Future," July 12, 1988.