

Barbara Törnquist-Plewa

# In Search of Transnational and Transcultural Memories of the Holocaust

Examples from Sweden and Poland

## Abstract

The memory of the Holocaust has become one of the most salient and fully-fledged transnational collective memories traveling around the world. Most of the scholarship tracing the transnational flows of Holocaust memory representations has focussed on literature, films, and other media products. This lecture, however, instead foregrounds the research on memory practices in specific geographic locations. It aims to demonstrate the transnational dimension of national and local Holocaust memories, as well as to trace how this memory actually travels across national borders and what happens in this process. It also raises the question about the potential of transnational Holocaust memories to produce new stories, new social relations and solidarities. The text presents examples of transnational Holocaust memory at work in two very different localities: the Swedish capital, Stockholm, and the provincial Polish town of Szydłowiec, which prior to the Holocaust was a shtetl. These different sites, when analysed side by side, demonstrate a variety of the trajectories along which memories move across borders. Additionally, in connection with these cases, the paper discusses the extent to which transnational memories are also transcultural – that is, culturally hybrid memories that have a transformative power, enabling people to imagine new communities and new types of belonging.

## Transnational Memory – An Introduction

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a ‘memory turn’ within the humanities and social sciences. The multidisciplinary research area of memory studies was established with its own scholarly journals, publication series, and a worldwide, international organisation, the Memory Studies Association. A consensus exists on the importance of studying social/collective/cultural memories, understood broadly as the representations of the past used by and within social groups and enacting their identities. At the beginning of the ‘memory turn’, scholars focussed very much on national memories, with the nation as the primary unit of investigation. During the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, memory studies have moved beyond such ‘methodological nationalism’, that is, the tendency to see the nation as a kind of ‘natural container’ of collective memory.<sup>1</sup>

A clear interest has arisen for studies on how memories are transferred across national borders and how they are mediated and received beyond the communities

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Lucy Bond/Jessica Rapson (ed.), *The Transcultural Turn. Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*, Berlin 2014, and Chiara De Cesari/Ann Rigney (ed.), *Transnational Memory. Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, Berlin 2014.

that originally produced them. Stories about the past have to some extent always been on the move across cultural and national borders, carried by media that have the capacity to cross borders and by people who move and mediate the stories across borders. However, the scale and the speed of these movements have significantly increased since the 1990s due to the time-space compression caused by new forms of globalised digital communication, large scale mobility across the globe (including mass migration and mass tourism), and transnational capital flows. As a result, the transnational 'travelling'<sup>2</sup> of memories has become intensely visible and there is a need to better understand what happens in this process.

One of the most salient, fully-fledged transnational collective memories travelling around the world since the 1980s has been the memory of the Holocaust. As pointed out by a number of scholars,<sup>3</sup> the memory of the Holocaust has a universalist reach and it has become a 'global memory imperative' connected with the propagation of human rights. Most of the scholarship tracing the transnational flows of representations of Holocaust memory has focussed on media products such as films, literature, and other texts and images, not least those communicated via the internet.<sup>4</sup> However, in the following presentation, I want to foreground instead the research on memory practices in specific geographic localities and to show how the transnational production of memory works at the local level. More specifically, I will present some results of my research on Holocaust memory conducted in two very different localities: Stockholm, the cosmopolitan capital of Sweden, untouched by the Second World War; and Szydlowiec, a provincial, culturally homogenous Polish town, and a former shtetl that lost the majority of its inhabitants in the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> By using these two distinct cases, I aim to highlight the multiscalarity of transnational mnemonic processes and to show a variety of the trajectories along which memories move across the borders. Finally, in the concluding part of this presentation, I will briefly discuss the effects of transnationally mediated memories. Can they generate new stories and new social relations, as proposed by several researchers?<sup>6</sup> Does the notion of 'transnational memory' signify a transformation of memory in the direction of enabling new identifications? Or do we need other concepts, such as 'transcultural memory', in order to capture the transformative potential of mnemonic encounters across borders?

2 For the concept, see: Astrid Erll, *Travelling Memory*, in: *Parallax* 17 (2011) 4, 4-18.

3 Daniel Levy/Nathan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, Philadelphia 2006; Amos Goldberg/Haim Hazan (ed.), *Marking Evil. Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*, New York 2015. See also: Wulf Kansteiner, *Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies*, in: Tea Sindbaek Andersen/Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (ed.), *The Twentieth Century in European Memory. Transcultural Mediation and Reception*, Leiden 2017, 305-344.

4 For examples, see: Astrid Erll/Ann Rigney (ed.), *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Berlin 2009, and Rick Cronshaw (ed.), *Transcultural Memory*, New York 2013.

5 My work on this subject, published in several articles and book chapters, was conducted within three collaborative research projects: "The Holocaust and the European Historical Culture", financed by the Swedish Bank Centenary Foundation; the network project "Transnational Memory Studies", co-financed by universities in Utrecht, Lund, Konstanz, Frankfurt am Main, and Chicago; and "The Europeanization of Realms of Memory and the Invention of a Common European Heritage in Poland and Sweden", financed by the Polish National Science Centre.

6 De Cesari/Rigney, *Transnational Memory*, 8.

## Contextualising the Swedish Case

During the Second World War, Sweden was not under Nazi occupation: it was allowed to stay neutral for the price of substantial concessions to Germany, such as the transit of German troops and close economic cooperation between the two states. This puts into question Sweden's moral and political stance in relation to the Holocaust. Admittedly, Sweden undertook rescue actions during the war, saving numerous Danish Jews and also many Norwegian ones. However, anti-semitism had been strong in Sweden before the war and the country's population did not support the idea of giving asylum to large numbers of Jewish refugees arriving in Sweden from Germany between 1933 and 1939.

For a long time in Sweden, there was a very limited interest for a discussion of these issues as well as of the history of the the Holocaust and the Second World War in general. Until the 1990s, the dominant Swedish narrative about the Second World War was that the country had just been an innocent bystander. Indeed, in parallel with the growing interest in Holocaust remembrance in the United States and Europe in the 1980s, a few debates on the question of Swedish complicity took place. However, it was during the process of Sweden's accession to the European Union (EU) in the years from 1993 to 1995 – the formal accession took place on 1 January 1995 – that the Swedish interest in Holocaust memory was taken to a new level.

Sweden became an EU member state in 1995, at a point when the EU began to turn the Holocaust into a common memory for all of Europe. This was evidenced, among other examples, by the European Parliament's "Resolution on European and International Protection for Nazi Concentration Camps as Historical Monuments" (1993) and "Resolution on a Day to Commemorate the Holocaust" (1995).<sup>7</sup> Sweden, a new-comer to the EU, quickly took the lead in these politics of memory. In 1997, just two years after its accession to the EU, Sweden's prime minister Göran Persson initiated the state-sponsored campaign *Living History*. Its declared purpose was to inform Swedish citizens about the history of the Holocaust and its effects on and meaning for Swedish society. The campaign resulted in the publication and distribution of the book *Tell Ye Your Children* in 1998.<sup>8</sup> The book recounts, in a popular manner, the history of the Holocaust in Europe from 1933 to 1945, and it was sent out for free to every household in Sweden. It was subsequently also adopted for educational use in five other EU member states, including two post-communist ones, Estonia and Latvia.<sup>9</sup> In 2012, a revised version was published in Sweden with an added chapter on the history of anti-semitism in Sweden and of racial theories that were widespread in the country in the 1920s and 1930s. In 2003, the *Living History* project was transformed into the Living History Forum, which is financed by the Swedish government and defines itself as a "public authority commissioned to work with issues related to tolerance, democracy and human rights, using the Holocaust and other crimes against

7 For more about the EU's politics of memory and the Holocaust, see, for example, Jens Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung. Der Holocaust im Fokus geschichtspolitischer Initiativen*, Frankfurt am Main 2008, and Anne Waehrens, *Erindringspolitik til forhandling. EU og erindringen om Holocaust, 1989–2009* [Politics of memory for negotiation. The EU and memory of the Holocaust, 1989–2009], PhD Thesis, Copenhagen University 2013, 128.

8 Stéphane Bruchfeld/Paul A. Levine, *Tell Ye Your Children: A Book About the Holocaust in Europe 1933–1945*, Stockholm 1998.

9 See: Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, *The Europeanization of the Memory and Heritage of the Second World War and the Holocaust in Sweden*, in: Krzysztof Kowalski/Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (eds.), *The Europeanization of Heritage and Memories in Poland and Sweden*, Kraków 2016, 133–162.

humanity as its starting point”.<sup>10</sup> The remarkable *Living History* project was not the only Swedish government investment for dealing with the Second World War and the Holocaust. In 1997, the government set up a special commission with the task of investigating what had happened to Jewish assets (such as gold, jewels, and works of art), that had arrived in Sweden during the Holocaust, either sold or deposited into Swedish banks by Nazi Germans. Furthermore, the 1990s saw a substantial wave of books, conferences, memorials, exhibitions, and projects focussing on the Second World War and the Holocaust, many of them with government funding.

The involvement of the Swedish government in Holocaust remembrance was not limited to the domestic, national scene, but it took place at the same time on an international level. In 1998, Prime Minister Persson, together with the American president, Bill Clinton, and the British prime minister, Tony Blair, established the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF). In 2000, Persson followed up this initiative by organising the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, a large international conference with the participation of many heads of governments and other prominent politicians from forty-five countries. Persson opened the conference with a speech in which he, inter alia, apologised “on behalf of Sweden for the Swedish policy of concession towards Nazi Germany during the Second World War; a policy that prolonged the war and indirectly contributed to the Holocaust”.<sup>11</sup> It was the first official speech acknowledging that Sweden had not been just an innocent bystander. In this way, Sweden officially joined ‘the politics of regret’ and reckoning with the past that has been promoted within the EU since the 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

The conference resulted in a common declaration in which the heads of government committed themselves to support work aimed at keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive. In the wake of this act, many countries introduced national commemoration days for Holocaust remembrance and gave their support to the ITF. Thus, Sweden was the initiator of the declaration which is perceived as a point at which the remembrance of the Holocaust gained political momentum, making steps towards the Holocaust becoming a ‘universal’ memory.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, the changes in the Swedish politics of memory concerning the Holocaust and the Second World War may be described as a remarkable journey, from the disinterest rooted in the country’s history as a bystander to a leadership role in promoting the memory of the Holocaust transnationally. With its Holocaust remembrance initiatives, Sweden – as a new EU member state – positioned itself in the European ‘club’ as worthy of its membership, and it strengthened its international image as a country engaged in human rights. Considering this process of the Swedish mnemonic awakening in relation to the Holocaust, it may be argued that Holocaust remembrance in Sweden has been formed under the influence of the EU as a transna-

<sup>10</sup> See the institution’s website <https://www.levandehistoria.se/english/about-us> (30 September 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Conny Mithander, *From the Holocaust to the Gulag. The Crimes of Nazism and Communism in Swedish Post-89 Memory Politics*, in: Conny Mithander/John Sundholm/Adrian Velicu (ed.), *European Cultural Memory Post-89*, New York 2013, 177–208, here 181.

<sup>12</sup> See: Jeffrey. K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret. On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*, New York 2007; Oriane Calligaro, *Negotiating Europe. EU Promotion of Europeanness Since the 1950s*, New York 2013, and Aline Sierp, *History, Memory and Trans-European Identity. Unifying Divisions*, New York 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Eckel/Claudia Moisel (ed.), *Universalisierung der Holocaust? Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik in internationaler Perspektive*, Göttingen 2008. ‘Universalisation’ means that Nazi crimes against Jews are presented as universal crimes against humanity, which is not entirely unproblematic. For a discussion of the tensions arising in this process, see: David. M. Seymour, *Holocaust Memory. Between Universal and Particular*, in: David. M. Seymour/Mercedes Camino (ed.), *The Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century. Contesting/Contested Memories*, New York 2017, 15–31.

tional memory actor. At the same time, though, Sweden became one of the transnational carriers of this memory by actively participating in the shaping of the EU's politics of memory of the Holocaust and in communicating this politics of memory worldwide.

A pertinent question that arises in this context is how the transnational memory of the Holocaust and the Swedish government's mnemonic activities, as described above, affected commemorative practices regarding the Holocaust in the public spaces of Swedish cities and towns. Several examples could be mentioned to illustrate that impact but, due to the limit of space, I will elaborate only on two of them, both from Stockholm.<sup>14</sup>

### Stockholm and the Transnational Memory of the Holocaust

One of the first and most visible material signs indicating Sweden's engagement in the memory of the Holocaust has been the erection of the Holocaust Memorial in Stockholm. The initiative to construct it came from the Association of Holocaust Survivors in Sweden. The association had for a long time wished to have a public place for the remembrance and mourning of family members who had perished in the Holocaust, but it could not afford to pay for the construction of a monument of proper stature. However, in 1994, when Sweden was on its way to becoming an EU member state and began to be involved in the EU's politics of memory, the association seized the opportunity to realise its long-planned project. Stockholm's City Council and a representative of the Swedish government signalled at this moment that if the association applied for financial support for the memorial, this would stand a very good chance of being granted.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the application was successful and the memorial was solemnly unveiled in 1998 by Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustav.

While Sweden's involvement in the EU's politics of memory was behind the decision for the funding of the memorial, its design also reveals transnational influences. The memorial is 42 meters long and runs the length of an alley which is named after Aaron Isaac, the first Jewish immigrant allowed to practice his religion in Sweden in 1781. The memorial begins at the entrance to a synagogue and contains several Jewish motifs (such as a menorah and quotes from the Old Testament). Its main part consists of seven granite slabs with approximately 8,000 names of victims from the survivors' families from all over Sweden. The names are followed by the dates and places of birth and death of the victims, which is rather unusual for Holocaust memorials. The multitude of places all over Europe from which the victims originated points to the historical European dimension of the commemorated event. Additionally, the monument contains the names of the largest death and concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Europe. This element was an idea borrowed from the Holocaust Memorial in Miami,<sup>16</sup> which demonstrates the transnational travelling of memory practices. Moreover, it can be argued that the inscription on the plaque placed on the monument expresses a mode of remembering that is very much in line with the EU's

14 For further examples, see: Björn Magnusson Staaf, *The White Buses. Creating Remembrance of the Second World War in Sweden*, in: Kowalski/Törnquist-Plewa, *The Europeanization of Heritage and Memories*, 163-188.

15 Information obtained by the author from Romuald Wróblewski, one of the main initiators of the Holocaust Memorial. Törnquist-Plewa, *The Europeanization of the Memory*, 141.

16 Information obtained by the author from Harry Pommert, then vice-president of the Association of Holocaust Survivors in Sweden. *Ibid.*





The Holocaust Memorial in Stockholm.

and Swedish state's use of the memory of the Holocaust as a pedagogical and political tool to fight racism and xenophobia. It states the following:

"Don't forget us! The cries of the six million Jews who during the years 1939–45 were killed by the Nazis and their helpers, echo from these stones. Here are 8,000 named victims whose memory is guarded by the surviving families who were rescued by Sweden. **Only with knowledge about the past can we fight racism, anti-Semitism and intolerance** [author's emphasis]"

In 2006, the Holocaust Memorial in Stockholm was extended by an additional construction called "Vägen" (The Way), according to a project by Gabriel Herdevall and Alexander Wolodarski. The aim was to connect the Holocaust Memorial with the monument to Raoul Wallenberg that was opened to the public in 2001 in a nearby square. The Vägen monument consists primarily of a paved road which begins with the following words in English: "These paving stones were taken from the former Jewish Ghetto in Budapest. A gift from the City of Budapest." The road contains a symbolic railway that leads to a stone globe placed in the nearby Raoul Wallenberg Square. The globe has an inscription that reads: "The road was straight, when Jews were deported to death. The road was winding, dangerous and full of obstacles, when Jews were trying to escape from the murderers." This inscription, which is in Swedish, is followed by a translation into English and 22 other languages corresponding to the nationalities of the largest groups of Holocaust victims.

According to Sivert Lindblom, who designed the Holocaust Memorial together with Gabriel Herdevall, the memorial's extension to Wallenberg Square creates "a bridge between Jewishness and Swedishness".<sup>17</sup> The Holocaust Memorial and the Vägen monument, taken together, speak both about the Jewish tragedy and, by recalling Wallenberg's actions in rescuing the Budapest Jews, about the Swedish effort to help. Thus, the whole memorial complex has both transnational and national dimensions. First, it is about Swedish-Jewish remembrance and heritage. By accounting for the names of the murdered, it specifically commemorates actual individuals – the relatives of Jews living in Sweden – and not Holocaust victims in general, as many

<sup>17</sup> See: Sivert Lindblom's official website, <http://sivertlindblom.se/folio/offentliga-arbeten/exteriorer/synagoga-forintelsemonumentet-stockholm-1998> (25 January 2016).

memorials of this kind otherwise do. Furthermore, due to the addition of the Vågen monument leading to Wallenberg Square, it expresses not only the memory and identity of the Jewish community but of the Swedish nation as a whole. The latter, while admitting its morally problematic wartime position, wants to identify itself today as a champion of human rights in the world.<sup>18</sup> The Vågen monument thus reaffirms this identity by commemorating Wallenberg, a Swedish Righteous among the Nations.

More generally, the remembrance of Wallenberg in contemporary Sweden constitutes the second example of transnational memory flows that I want to elaborate on. Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat in Budapest who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews by issuing them with the so-called “Schutz-Pass” (protective passport), which certified that they were Swedish citizens, and by lodging them in a number of buildings under Swedish protection. He disappeared in 1945 after being arrested by the Soviet military. The Swedish government’s efforts to find out about Wallenberg’s fate were weak throughout the Cold War. While people such as Simon Wiesenthal, Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, or the American president Jimmy Carter, wanted to investigate what had happened to him, Swedish diplomats avoided the issue. The ‘Wallenberg Affair’ was seen as a disturbance in the Swedish government’s highly prioritised policy of keeping Sweden neutral and in peaceful and good relations with the Soviet Union. Thus, while Raoul Wallenberg was internationally recognised after the Second World War as a hero and celebrated worldwide by such commemorative acts as monuments, posthumous awards of honorary citizenships (as in Canada and Israel), and depictions in films, until the 1990s he was almost non-existent in official public memory in Sweden. Consequently, it is justified to argue that the emergence of the memory of Wallenberg in Sweden must be seen as a result of transnational memory flows. First, his deeds were brought to the attention of the Swedish public via such products of popular culture as the American television series *A Hero’s Story*.<sup>19</sup> Second, and most importantly, the memory of him became useful for the Swedish government in the context of Sweden’s accession to the EU in the 1990s. From being an annoyance in Swedish-Soviet relations, Wallenberg changed into a symbolic asset when, after the Cold War, Sweden joined the EU’s politics of memory foregrounding Holocaust remembrance. The first initiatives to establish monuments in his honour were taken in Sweden as late as in the 1990s, and Sweden was actually one of the last countries to erect Wallenberg memorials.<sup>20</sup> In 1990, the first Swedish movie about Wallenberg was made: called *God afton, Herr Wallenberg* (Good Evening, Mr Wallenberg), it was directed by Kjell Grede. In the spirit of the European ‘politics of regret’, the film touched upon Sweden’s problematic neutrality during the Second World War.

Furthermore, in 2004, the exhibition *Raoul Wallenberg: A Man Can Make a Difference* was staged in the Jewish Museum in Stockholm as the first ever Swedish exhibition that commemorated Wallenberg.<sup>21</sup> The exhibition later toured several cities in post-communist countries where Wallenberg had previously been largely unknown. In 2009, another Swedish exhibition about Wallenberg was staged in the Army Museum in Stockholm; it was a careful reconstruction of his 1944 office in

18 For a discussion of this and other aspects of Swedish national identity, see: Andreas Heinö Johansson, Democracy between Collectivism and Individualism. De-Nationalisation and Individualisation in Swedish National Identity, in: *International Review of Sociology* 19 (2009) 2, 297-314.

19 Ulf Zander, Remembering and Forgetting the Holocaust. The Cases of Jan Karski and Raoul Wallenberg, in: Kowalski/Törnquist-Plewa, *The Europeanization of Heritage and Memories*, 197.

20 Tanja Schult, *A Hero’s Many Faces. Raoul Wallenberg in Contemporary Monuments*, London 2009.

21 Information obtained by the author from Yvonne Jacobsson, director of the Jewish Museum in Stockholm. See: Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, *The Europeanization of the Memory*, 146.



Wallenberg's room.

Budapest. In 2014, this was included in the museum's permanent exposition as a part of the section about the Second World War. This section was redesigned at that time, and its appearance constitutes solid evidence of the changes in the Swedish way of remembering the Second World War, brought about through the influence of the European politics of memory. The section now includes two rooms that deal with the memory of the Holocaust. This is a new and rather exceptional development, since the Army Museum is dedicated almost entirely to Swedish military history. Moreover, the new exhibition established in 2014 (a number of years after Sweden's *Living History* campaign in 1997 and the Stockholm Holocaust Forum in 2000) shows Sweden and Swedes in three different roles during the war: as bystanders (through posters depicting a peaceful countryside); as rescuers (through posters from Hungary where Wallenberg was active, as well as through footage of Holocaust survivors who found refuge in Sweden); and as collaborators (through objects pointing to the connections with both the lower and higher echelons of the German Army). The fact that the Army Museum – which has traditionally represented official historical narratives – articulates this multifaceted narrative of Swedish involvement in the Second World War, demonstrates how this kind of narrative has now become well established in Sweden. Additionally, the fact that the state Army Museum dedicates a special room to commemorate Wallenberg, who at no point in his life was a military hero, provides proof of how the transnational memory of him has travelled from abroad back to Sweden and became 'nationalised'. Wallenberg is singled out in the Army Museum as he now personifies Sweden's role as a rescuer during the war, a role that Swedish politicians prefer to emphasise in order to boost a positive national self-image of Sweden as a humanitarian nation.<sup>22</sup>

### Contextualising the Polish Case

In his excellent book *The Bondage to the Dead*, from 1997, the American scholar Michael C. Steinlauf convincingly shows how the memory of the Holocaust was 'Polonised' in Poland. Shortly after the war, the focus was switched from the suffering and struggle of Jews to the suffering of the entire Polish nation. It was not denied

<sup>22</sup> Ulf Zander, *Remembering and Forgetting the Holocaust. The Cases of Jan Karski and Raoul Wallenberg*, in: Kowalski/Törnquist-Plewa, *The Europeanization of Heritage and Memories*, 189-212.



that the German Nazis had wanted to exterminate all Jews, but school teaching, as well as books and films dealing with the Second World War, and other kinds of commemorative actions, had a strong tendency to emphasise only Polish suffering and struggle. The process can even be described as a form of memory appropriation.<sup>23</sup> The murderous politics of the Nazis were presented as something that hit Jews and Poles equally hard. Auschwitz became a symbol of Polish martyrdom. Generations of Poles educated in communist Poland were disinformed regarding the number and proportion of Jews killed in Auschwitz and believed that the majority of the victims were Poles.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, a question never properly discussed in communist Poland was the attitude of the Polish population towards the Jews during the Holocaust. Hushed up were the instances of local collaboration with the Germans, of blackmail and denouncement of persecuted Jews, not to mention the local pogroms, such as the one in Jedwabne in 1941. Many factors contributed to the marginalisation of Holocaust memory in Poland, such as the focus on Polish national suffering and victimhood, lingering anti-semitic attitudes, moral discomfort regarding the expropriation of Jewish possessions, and last but not least, an unwillingness to face the question of how far the Polish population was complicit in the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup>

The fall of the communist regime in 1989 and the democratisation of Poland opened up opportunities for a free debate on the issue of Polish-Jewish historical relations.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as an applicant for EU membership in the 1990s, Poland came into the orbit of the European politics of memory that assigned Holocaust remembrance a prominent place. This contributed to the rise of interest in the history of Polish Jews and their fate during the Second World War. A breakthrough came in 2000 with the publication of the American scholar Jan T. Gross' book *Neighbors*, which set off an immense Polish debate about the Poles' complicity in the Holocaust. Although the latter issue is still very much contentious, the debate reverberated in Polish culture and resulted in a large and still continuing wave of research, books, films, works of art, and other mnemonic acts dedicated to the memory of Polish Jews in general and the Holocaust in particular. Thus, the memory of Polish Jews and their annihilation in the Holocaust occupies a clearly visible place in official public discourse in contemporary Poland. However, a question remains: what happened with this memory on the local level in the multitude of Polish small towns, many of them being of a shtetl character, which had lost their Jewish population during the war and were repopulated by ethnic Poles?<sup>27</sup> I decided to shed more light on this issue by conducting a study of one such locality – the town of Szydłowiec in central Poland.

23 For a closer description of this phenomenon that to some extent continues in contemporary Polish society, see: Jelena Subotić, 'The Appropriation of Holocaust Memory in Post-Communist Eastern Europe', in: *Modern Languages Open* 1 (2020) 22, 1-8.

24 Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, 'The Use and Non-Uses of the Holocaust Memory in Poland', in: Niklas Bernsand/Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (ed.), *Painful Pasts and Useful Memories. Remembering and Forgetting in Europe*, Lund 2012, 11-28.

25 For evidence and discussion of the different reasons for this forgetting, see: Sławomir Kaprański, 'Jews and the Holocaust in Poland's Memoryscapes. An Inquiry into Transcultural Amnesia', in: Tea Sindbak Andersen/Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (ed.), *The Twentieth Century in European Memory. Transcultural Mediation and Reception*, Leiden 2017, 170-197.

26 However, it should be pointed out that the illiberal political party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) has tried to stifle this debate by, for example, introducing in 2018 the so called 'anti-defamation law' prohibiting claims that 'the Polish nation' was responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes. See: Larry Ray and Sławomir Kaprański, 'Introduction to the Special Issue – Disputed Holocaust Memory in Poland', in: *Holocaust Studies*, 25 (2019) 3, 209-219.

27 This issue was understudied when I began to conduct and publish my research on it in the first years of the twenty-first century. Since then, however, interest in the topic has grown steadily. About a decade later, a number of publications dealing with this question appeared, written by both Polish and non-Polish scholars, such as Antoni Sulek, Roma Sendyka, Marta Duch-Dyngosz, and Yechiel Weizman.

## Szydłowiec and the Transnational Memory of the Holocaust

Before the Second World War, Szydłowiec had about 11,000 inhabitants, of whom 75 per cent were Polish Jews. Almost all of them were murdered in the extermination camp of Treblinka. From 2002 to 2004, as part of a broader study on Holocaust remembrance in Europe, I conducted field studies in the town, investigating how the local population dealt with the memory of their perished former inhabitants. My choice of precisely this former shtetl was motivated by the fact that I was born and grew up there. This facilitated both the collection of data of a sensitive nature and the verification of it using my own previous knowledge of the place. To be brought up in a certain culture and environment can, with some reservations, be seen as a kind of extended participant observation. At the same time, the risk of 'home blindness' that can be associated with researchers doing fieldwork in their home environment has, in my case, been counteracted by the fact that I left the town at the age of eighteen and have lived most of my life outside of Poland. Thus, in relation to the people in Szydłowiec, I am both an 'insider' and an 'outsider'.

The research that I conducted<sup>28</sup> showed that the Jewish past of Szydłowiec had, until the end of the 1990s, been to a large extent suppressed. Street names referring to Jewish life – Rabbi Street or Synagogue Street – had been changed. The ruins of the main synagogue, demolished by the Germans, had been cleared away without a trace, while a second, small, private synagogue had been turned into a pub, and nobody knew that it had once been a house of prayer. The only recognisable remnant of the Jewish past, a cemetery, was until the 1980s conspicuously absent from the official list of the town's historical monuments. For a long time, the local authorities turned a blind eye to the disappearance of gravestones from there that were used for building materials.

The calendar of official commemorations in Szydłowiec never included one for the Jewish inhabitants who perished in the Holocaust. A visitor could not find any information about the fact that the town had lost the majority of its residents in the Holocaust. The few existing publications on local history did mention the large number of Jews in pre-war Szydłowiec and laconically referred to their annihilation, but the marginal space given to this fact was striking. The killing of three-quarters of the town's population was presented as if did not impinge at all upon the life of the remaining inhabitants. My investigation showed that the oldest residents in the town, especially those who lived in formerly Jewish-owned houses, did not want to remember the Jewish past of Szydłowiec. They transmitted very little information to post-war generations about life in the town before the war and what had happened there during the Holocaust. However, the surveys and interviews that I conducted showed that, at the same time, these residents had managed to had transmitted a considerable amount of prejudice and resentment towards Jews.

In sum, when I began my first field study in Szydłowiec in 2002, the town's Jewish past was almost non-existent in public memory. Nevertheless, my study revealed at the same time a few signs of budding changes in local memories. A first-ever collection of historical, scholarly essays dealing with Szydłowiec's Jews was published and presented at a conference in the town in 1997. A few enthusiastic local schoolteach-

28 See the following two publications: Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, *Tale of Szydłowiec. Memory and Oblivion in a Former Shtetl in Poland*, in: Klas-Göran Karlsson/Ulf Zander (ed.), *The Holocaust on Post-War Battlefields. Genocide as Historical Culture*, Malmö/Lund 2006, 191-224, and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, *A Tale of a Former Shtetl. The Memory of Jews and the Holocaust in Poland*, in: Martin L. Davies/Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, *How the Holocaust Looks Now. International Perspectives*, Palgrave 2007, 116-125.

ers, encouraged by non-governmental organisations from Warsaw, started to involve school children in projects aimed at collecting both memories and memorabilia connected with the Szydłowiec Jews. Poland was in the midst of its post-communist transformation and preparations for EU accession, which took place in 2004. One could perceive that changes were underway. Thus, while finishing my study in 2005, I already hoped to come back after a lengthy period of time and to see whether this slowly growing awareness of the town's Jewish past would result in a transformation of local memory. About ten years later, I was able to realise that plan.

When I returned to the town in 2017 for a follow-up study,<sup>29</sup> I could easily see that clear changes had occurred in relation to the Jewish past. Material remnants of Jewish life are now officially declared to be a part of Szydłowiec's historical heritage. The Jewish past and Jewish heritage are recognised and highlighted on the town's website, as well as in guides, leaflets, and books dealing with local history. Moreover, a permanent exhibition on the history of Szydłowiec that opened in 2017 pays attention to the town's Jewish past and contains a number of authentic Jewish objects (such as prayer books, menorahs, and books in Yiddish and Hebrew) which belonged to the town's Jewish inhabitants. One of the local teachers had collected these objects with the help of schoolchildren and donated them to the local museum. The local authorities also began to care for a more regular upkeep of the Jewish cemetery, and in 2011 they finally officially registered the still preserved Jewish house of prayer as a historical monument. However, it should be noted that none of these two locations was included in the large-scale revitalisation project of the town that was conducted from 2011 to 2014 and co-financed by EU funds. The Jewish heritage is recognised but not prioritised in promoting the town as a tourist destination. Instead, the focus is on its aristocratic heritage (namely a castle) and historical Catholic monuments.

The construction of a small monument, or rather a commemorative plaque, to honour the memory of Szydłowiec's Holocaust victims constitutes another important change. It was solemnly unveiled in 2014 with the participation of the mayor and representatives of the city council and a few Jewish organisations, as well as of religious representatives from the rabbinical office in Warsaw and the local Catholic church. Admittedly, the town already had a monument dedicated to "Polish citizens of Jewish origin from Szydłowiec and its surroundings" killed during the Second World War. It was commissioned by the district's Communist Party branch in 1967. However, this monument never became a site of memory. Placed in the middle of the neglected Jewish cemetery, it was forgotten and left to decay. My investigation in 2004 showed that few people even knew of its existence. Upon my return in 2017, it was still there, derelict and abandoned. The commemorative plaque from 2014 is, on the other hand, situated in a visible place and includes the explanation that it marks the site of the pre-war synagogue that was destroyed by the German Nazis. The plaque informs visitors in Polish, English, and Hebrew that 21,000 Jews were "imprisoned in the local ghetto and murdered by German perpetrators of genocide". The plaque seems to be integrated into the town's memoryscape in a way that the old monument at the Jewish cemetery never was. Moreover, in contrast to the old monument, the new one has never been vandalised. On the contrary, on the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day, celebrated in Poland on 19 April (the day of the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising), two local teachers engaged with the Jewish memory of the town come with school children to lay flowers at the commemorative plaque.

<sup>29</sup> For the results of this, see: Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, *The Transnational Dynamics of Local Remembrance. The Jewish Past in a Former Shtetl in Poland*, in: *Memory Studies*, 11 (2018) 3, 301-314.



The old and new monuments side by side.

The attitude to this new site of memory seems to be positive. “Finally, we have a place to which we can take Jewish visitors, without being ashamed”, I heard in one of the focus group interviews that I conducted during my field study. The reference to the feeling of shame gives evidence to a rising awareness that, until recently, in relation to the town’s Jewish past, the local society had not lived up to otherwise widely recognised standards on how to commemorate local victims of the Second World War. In general, during my follow-up field study, I also noticed a largely welcoming and relaxed attitude towards Jewish visitors. This constitutes a marked change from more than a decade earlier, when I could clearly discern expressions of anxiety among the contemporary owners of the formerly Jewish-owned houses who were concerned that Jews were coming to reclaim their property. While still present, these worries are now mostly rebutted and even scorned.<sup>30</sup>

How did all of these changes occur?

In my answer to this question, I want to foreground transnational dynamics of memory production and their operation on the level of a locality. I argue that imported mnemonic material and transnational actors played a significant role in the rediscovery of the town’s forgotten Jewish past. To begin with, while analysing the origins of the mnemonic change in Szydłowiec, I discovered that the main body of knowledge disseminated to the public about the town’s Jewish past originates in the *Szydłowiec Memorial Book* (the so-called ‘Yizker’ book in Yiddish), published in English translation in New York in 1989. Like other Yizker books, it was written by survivors originating from the same place (Landsmanshaftn) and contained their memories of the vanished community before and during the Holocaust. It appeared in a very limited edition and was primarily addressed to the inner circle of survivors and their families.

The *Szydłowiec Memorial Book* first reached the town in 2004, almost by chance. It was a non-Jewish emigrant from Szydłowiec interested in Judaica who found it in a bookshop in New York. He bought several copies at once and, knowing about my research interests, sent one copy to me and one to Sława Lorenc-Hanusz, a history teacher in Szydłowiec and one of the few enthusiasts for local Jewish memorabilia with whom I cooperated during my field study. Since she did not read English, I

<sup>30</sup> For direct quotations from interviews and the local press, see: Törnquist-Plewa, *The Transnational Dynamics of Local Remembrance*, 307.





Cover of the Yizker book.

summarised much of the book's contents for her and urged her to obtain a proper translation of at least some parts, so that she could use the book in her activities. In 2007 she, together with Grzegorz Miernik, a professional historian, published the first popular publication about Szydłowiec's Jews, *Przechować pamięć tamtych dni: Przewodnik po zabytkach kultury żydowskiej Szydłowca/Preserving Memory of Those Days: A Guidebook of the Monuments of Jewish Culture in Szydłowiec* (in Polish and English), using some material from the Szydłowiec Memorial Book. Furthermore, she referenced the *Szydłowiec Memorial Book* again when she wrote a chapter in a volume containing Szydłowiec residents' memories of local events in the twentieth century, published in 2015.<sup>31</sup> The incorporation of Jewish voices into this book about the town, whose title is *That is Our Life* (my emphasis), can be seen as a step toward the gradual inclusion of Jewish memories in public memory. Thanks to both publications, also accessible on the internet,<sup>32</sup> Szydłowiec's Jewish past has become clearly visible for the public.

A few excerpts from the *Szydłowiec Memorial Book* were also published in Polish translation in the local periodical *Dom na Skale* (Home on the Cliff),<sup>33</sup> which aroused further interest in the town's Jewish history. Some voices proposed that the whole *Szydłowiec Memorial Book* be translated into Polish as an important source for local history.<sup>34</sup> However, this has not yet been realised. As I found out in my interviews with local memory activists, their enthusiasm for the translation cooled down when they realised that a professional translation of the whole book meant including sensitive passages that had hitherto been omitted in the translation. These passages contain instances of the indecent behaviour of some Poles towards their Jewish neighbours, as well as the names of those in Szydłowiec who denounced Jews to the Ger-

31 See: Sława Lorenc-Hanusz, Polacy i Żydzi z Szydłowca i okolic w godzinie próby [Poles and Jews from Szydłowiec and the Surrounding Area in Trying Times], in: Agnieszka Chalastra et al (ed.), *To nasze życie ... wspomnienia mieszkańców Szydłowca i okolic* [This Is Our Life ... Memories of the Inhabitants of Szydłowiec and its Surroundings], Szydłowiec 2015, 133-148.

32 See: <http://sckzamek.pl/old/dokumenty/przechowacpamiec.pdf> (15 November 2021).

33 *Dom na Skale*, 2 (2008) 58 and 3 (2008) 59.

34 For quotations of such opinions expressed in the local press, see: Törnquist-Plewa, *The Transnational Dynamics of Local Remembrance*, 305.



mans. None of these individuals are alive today, but their families still live in the town. There is fear regarding how the local community might react to such disclosures and their consequences both for the descendants of the perpetrators and for those who would be making the perpetrators' deeds widely known by translating the Yizker book. In the opinion of the local memory activists, Szydłowiec is not yet prepared to fully face the difficult parts of its past, so the translation of the whole *Szydłowiec Memorial Book* has to wait.

However, young people from Szydłowiec who – in contrast to the older generation – have a good knowledge of English, can access the entire book, since it is now available online both on the portal *The Virtual Shtetl* and on the Yad Vashem Museum website. This enabled Patrycja Wlazło, a history student from Szydłowiec, to write a Polish-language master's thesis called *Żydzi Szydłowieccy pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1943* (Szydłowiec Jews during the German Occupation 1939–1943) in 2010, using the Yizker book as one of her main sources. The thesis speaks openly about the anti-semitism of Szydłowiec's non-Jewish inhabitants, both during the Holocaust and immediately after the war. However, just a few people in the town are familiar with this thesis, of which only one copy is available in the local library.

In sum, the case of the *Szydłowiec Memorial Book* demonstrates how a particular memory central to the identity of one group can travel across cultures and help to model the narrative of another group. The book was written to keep the memory of lost Jewish life in Szydłowiec alive for the survivors and their descendants. Nevertheless, it transcended its initial internal Jewish context. It travelled across borders – also in a literal sense – back to the place it commemorated, and it triggered memory work among non-Jewish inhabitants of that place, helping to bring the long-suppressed past to life. While my study of Szydłowiec revealed that the import of mnemonic material had an impact on the development of the local memory, it also clearly pointed to the crucial role of transnational memory actors. The involvement of Jewish memory actors deserves special attention in this context. The number of Jews living in Poland today is miniscule. Some researchers even claim that the revival of Jewish culture in Poland is “a renaissance without Jews”.<sup>35</sup> The case of Szydłowiec, however, bears witness to the opposite view, pointing to the contribution of Jews from around the world. Reading in the local press about the new commemorative activities undertaken in Szydłowiec in relation to the town's Jewish past, I noticed that all of them had received financial support from Jewish or Polish-Jewish foundations and organisations. For example, the Nissenbaum Foundation supported the Day of Jewish Culture – Mazel Tov, the Taube Foundation supported the 2009 photography project *School Diary – A Story from Szydłowiec*, based on a school diary from 1937–1938 by a Jewish class in Szydłowiec, and the Shalom Foundation financed a number of commemorative projects involving local pupils. Moreover, I found out that the initiative and the perseverance of two transnational Jewish organisations was crucial for the foundation of the previously mentioned commemorative plaque dedicated to the Holocaust victims from Szydłowiec. It was initiated by the Tel Aviv-based Israel-Poland Friendship Society that also contributed to financing the project together with the Association of Friends of Szydłowiec, a French-Belgian organisation of Jews originating from Szydłowiec and their families. The office of the mayor of Szydłowiec was an additional donor.

35 Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish. Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*, Berkeley 2002; Stanisław Tyszką, *Restitution of Communal Property and the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland*, in: Erica Lehrer and Michael Meng (ed.), *Jewish Spaces in Contemporary Poland*, Bloomington 2015, 46–70.

Although financial support from Jewish actors to the commemorative initiatives has been significant, considerable importance also has to be given to actual meetings. These include face-to-face interactions between the residents of Szydłowiec and Jewish visitors to the town, such as representatives of Jewish institutions and organisations, Israeli students making civil pilgrimages to Holocaust sites and, last but not least, former Jewish residents and their families visiting places where their ancestors lived. The interviews with the inhabitants, conducted for my study, indicated that the locals, by acting as hosts to the Jewish visitors, began to see their hometown through the eyes of their guests. 'The gaze of the Other' made at least some of them ashamed of the town's neglect of its Jewish heritage and prompted them to take action.

My study also indicated that the mnemonic activities that actively involve both Poles and Jews have been of particular value. One of the most interesting entails the participation of Szydłowiec youth in meetings between school classes from Poland and Israel. These take place within the framework of the nationwide initiative *Preserving Memory: History and Culture of the Two Nations*, which has been organised as part of a special 2002 agreement between the Polish and Israeli governments. The idea is to give young Israelis who take school trips to the former death camps an opportunity to meet their Polish peers and together commemorate the lost Jewish world in Poland. The meetings are carefully prepared by twinning schools from Poland and Israel on a voluntary basis, and the preparations include training teachers who participate in the project. Education about the Holocaust is at its centre. In 2010, one of the two secondary schools in Szydłowiec joined the project and for several years hosted school classes from Hof Hasharon. In addition to mutual presentations and conversations, each visit included a walk together to the Jewish sites in Szydłowiec and a joint Holocaust commemoration ceremony at the Jewish cemetery. In the focus group interviews conducted with pupils in Szydłowiec who participated in these meetings, I learned that these were considerably appreciated. The pupils described the encounters as "exciting" and as an opportunity to learn more both about Israel and about the past of their own town. They also told me that the first time they walked together through the town, as a big group of around ninety people, people in Szydłowiec were astonished and some were perturbed. However, in the following years nobody seemed uneasy. Local authorities, as well as some private businesses, have co-sponsored the event each year by buying food and small presents for the visitors. The attitude of the visitors has also changed. During the first visit, some of the Israeli teachers and especially the Israeli security guards seemed to be quite nervous, while at the following encounter the atmosphere was much more relaxed.

The meetings between Polish and Israeli students in the town can be described as transnational rituals of commemoration crafted as encounters between the real 'Others' in a concrete physical place and involving bodily experiences and emotions. Considering the existing mutual stereotypes that burden relations between Poles and Jews, these encounters have enabled the traversal of cultural borders and the dismantling of culturally engrained prejudices. On the Polish side, the encounters have subdued the image of the Jew as an 'alien' in a country with practically no Jewish inhabitants. On the Israeli side, they have curbed the image of the Pole as a staunch anti-semitic. The ritual trips made by young Israelis to Poland to visit the former death camps have been criticised as serving nationalistic sentiment.<sup>36</sup> I would

36 Jackie Feldman, *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag. Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli Nation*, Oxford 2008, 260; Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands. Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*, New York 2013, 201-203.



The meeting between Israeli and Polish students in Szydłowiec.

argue that the joint Polish-Israeli commemoration in Szydłowiec, imbued with affective elements, has cracked, at least temporarily, 'national containers' and activated the potential for better future relations.

While the Jewish memory actors should be seen as crucial transnational memory carriers and of vital importance for local memories in Szydłowiec, I also need to mention my own role in this context, as a Swedish scholar of Polish origin. Thinking back to my recurrent field studies in the town, I realise that I have become a transnational memory actor in the formation of local memories. By conducting interviews and conversing with many local people, I influenced the ongoing memory work. I encouraged people to think about matters that had not previously concerned them. Moreover, as a person and scholar from abroad, I brought new perspectives on the local past.

Which of the changes can be related to my work? The most direct effect can be traced to the influence of the *Szydłowiec Memorial Book*, which I promoted among those locals who looked for sources from which they could learn more about Szydłowiec's Jewish past. Furthermore, my research work encouraged the town's memory activist, the only one who was in 2002 committed to Jewish heritage, to continue her own work. Our cooperation in carrying out interviews reinforced her conviction that what she was doing was important. Additionally, with my authority as a foreign scholar I was able to empower her, especially in her relations with the local authorities, which were largely passive regarding the commemoration of the Jewish past but receptive to initiatives from below.

I certainly stimulated curiosity about the Jewish past of Szydłowiec among many local people, not least by holding lectures about the Holocaust, Szydłowiec, and the post-war oblivion for pupils and teachers in local schools. Some of the schoolteachers I met on these occasions later engaged in the commemoration of the local Jewish past. Thus, my field research in Szydłowiec turned out to have some transformative impact on the local memory, although it never was planned to be 'action research', that is, a combination of research and social action. Applying an autoethnographic

perspective to my study, I can state that I came to the town as a scholar, but by doing research in the field I also unintentionally but not unwillingly assumed the role of a memory actor. Moreover, due to my position as both an outsider living abroad and an insider as an emigrant from Szydłowiec, I became a carrier of transnational memory. My work enabled the town residents to look at local history through other, non-local, transnational lenses and to be confronted with ideas produced elsewhere.

## Coda

In their introduction to the trailblazing book *Transnational Memory* from 2014, two scholars, Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, spotlight the multiscalarity of transnational mnemonic processes and invite further research on how they operate. Moreover, they emphasise the need to explore the “generative” potential of transnationally mediated memories for producing new stories and new social relations.<sup>37</sup> Inspired by these ideas, I analysed two case studies that I have presented in this lecture. I used transnational optics to take a look at how transnational memories of the Holocaust ‘travelled’ to Stockholm in Sweden and to Szydłowiec in Poland, and what the effects were of these transnational mnemonic encounters.

Both cases, although radically different, illustrate the transnational dynamics of memory production. Both in Stockholm and in Szydłowiec, transnational practices, imported mnemonic material, and transnational actors played a significant role in the rediscovery of a marginalised, forgotten, or suppressed past. They significantly contributed to the mnemonic changes that occurred in these places through a complex process, involving an interplay between many institutions, groups, and individuals. These included the EU with its politics of memory, governmental bodies on both national and local levels, Jewish organisations of survivors and their families, Jewish foundations and, last but not least, individual memory activists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, communicating across national borders. This shows that transnational memories work on multiple, interlocking scales involving the personal/intimate, local, regional, national, and global. The relationship between these different levels and scales cannot be described as just a ‘bottom-up’ or a ‘top-down’ process, but it points to a multidirectionality and multiscalarity of memory formation.<sup>38</sup>

How can we then summarise and define the changes observed in the memory cultures in both of the cases presented above? Both studies provide evidence of the fact that transnational memory work has facilitated the production and transmission of new memories. However, the transformative potential of the new narratives has been just partially realised. In the case of Stockholm and Sweden, the awoken interest in the commemoration of the Holocaust led to, at least to some extent, self-critical reflections on the country’s questionable neutrality in the Second World War. Such reflections have been visible, for example, in the exhibition on Sweden during the Second World War in the Army Museum in Stockholm. However, in the case of Szydłowiec in Poland, the new memories have not given rise to a self-critical reading of the town’s own past, a feature characteristic of a reflexive cosmopolitan

37 Chiara De Cesari/Ann Rigney, Introduction, in: De Cesari and Rigney (ed.), *Transnational Memory*, 1-11.

38 Ibid. See also: Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory in Migratory Settings. The Case of Post-Holocaust Germany*, in: De Cesari/Rigney (ed.), *Transnational Memory*, 123-148.

memory.<sup>39</sup> While there are individuals who critically evaluate Polish attitudes towards Jews during and after the Holocaust, there is no support on the public level for discussing such matters locally. Nonetheless, a visible effect of the transnational memory work in the town is the reduction of the anxiety connected with the Jewish heritage and with memories of the Jewish past. The transmission of new memories has at least to some extent dismantled the Otherness of the Jews and promoted openness in the local community, demonstrating that the Other is not so different. The Jewish past and Jewish heritage are now recognised and included in the town's memoryscape, and the local victims of the Holocaust are commemorated.

In general, however, both the Swedish and Polish cases suggest that although transnational memory work transforms the national and local mnemonic narratives, the direction of these transformations is not clear. In both cases, national memory framework seems to remain powerful and still dictates how the past is used and what is made public. Thus, although transnational memory is about the traversal of cultural and/or geopolitical borders, it is by no means equal to a hybridisation of memories that leads to new solidarities and new types of belonging. For the latter kind of memory, I would like to propose instead the concept of 'transcultural memory'.<sup>40</sup> Transcultural memory, in my understanding, includes not only the crossing of borders but also the transformation of cultural borders in a direction that enables imagining new, inclusive communities and modified identities. Thus, in the Swedish and Polish cases that I have presented above, transcultural memories, understood as proposed here, are not prominent. Some of the memory activists I interviewed for my studies articulated them. However, in general, the transnational memory work in both cases has not yet resulted in a wide production of transcultural memories on the level of society. This points to the necessity for distinguishing between the two categories of memories and to a realisation of the limited transformative power of transnational mnemonic encounters.

**Barbara Törnquist-Plewa** is a Professor of Eastern and Central European Studies at Lund University in Sweden. Between 2012 and 2016, she led the international research network *In Search for Transcultural Memory in Europe* (within the EU COST programme). Her research focusses on nationalism, identity, and collective memories. She is the editor and author of a number of books and articles in English, Swedish, and Polish. Her publications include *The Twentieth Century in European Memory* (Brill 2017) and *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* (De Gruyter 2016), both edited with Tea Sindbaek Andersen, and *Whose Memory? Which Future? Remembering Ethnic Cleansing and Lost Cultural Diversity in Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe* (Berghahn 2016).

E-mail: [barbara.tornquist-plewa@slav.lu.se](mailto:barbara.tornquist-plewa@slav.lu.se)

<sup>39</sup> For more about cosmopolitan memory, see: Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces. Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland*, Harvard University Press 2011, 250, and Daniel Levy/Natan Sznaider, *Memory Unbound. The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory*, *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2002) 11, 87-106.

<sup>40</sup> See also the discussion of this concept by Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory in Migratory Settings*, 129-130.



---

Quotation: Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, In Search of Transnational and Transcultural Memories of the Holocaust. Examples from Sweden and Poland, in: S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 8 (2021) 3, 65-83.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0321/SWL\\_BTOR01](https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0321/SWL_BTOR01)

**S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.** is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 8 (2021) 3 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-NC-ND  
(Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives)

In appreciation to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) for supporting this publication.