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The Future of Auschwitz: Some Personal Reflections*

JONATHAN WEBBER

O earth, cover not thou my blood,
and let my cry have no resting-place.
(Job 16: 18)

'The future of Auschwitz' is a curious and perhaps provocative turn of phrase, but it summons up the realisation that the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945 by no means marked the end of their history. Holocaust remembrance, the religious and moral duty incumbent upon Jews to grieve for the victims of the Holocaust, will continue to endow the name of Auschwitz with a clear sense of the pastness of the event. But the significance of Auschwitz is not embedded exclusively in the past. It is a pointer towards the meanings that can and will be attributed to the event, both in the present and in the future. Job's passionate plea that his blood should lie permanently exposed, that it should never sink into the earth and so never be covered up by the fullness of time, is in this context a powerful and indeed chilling invocation for remembrance long into the future, an exhortation to the need for Jewish cultural and political memory to activate itself constantly with reference to past tragedy and catastrophe.

My theme in this paper, however, is far more prosaic, and I am aware that I shall be discussing the future of Auschwitz in a form of language that might have surprised Job and even offended him. So I should apologise to those readers who are themselves Auschwitz survivors, and to others with close personal ties of one sort or another with what happened at Auschwitz. But in many ways Auschwitz touches all of us personally, for in a sense we are, all of us, implicated in Auschwitz – we are all mourners, and all of us can think of ourselves as comforters of the mourners. Hence the subject of Auschwitz is one that needs to be taken universally, although my purpose in this paper is necessarily limited – to the question of how the future of Auschwitz can be seen in the context of its central significance, and the central challenge it poses, to the Jews of our own day.

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I

Before I first visited Auschwitz three years ago to undertake a survey of the place as a social anthropologist, the impression I had from Jewish friends and associates was that to the extent that Auschwitz existed in real physical space, it was little more than a desolate, silent and lonely field somewhere in Poland, where tall grasses swaying in the wind had now come up to cover their appalling guilty secret. It is possible that this image of present-day Auschwitz is little more than a transfer from popular images of First World War battlefields – in Flanders, for example – especially for those in Britain accustomed to the annual November Remembrance Sunday rituals, and the televised recollections of war and death embedded in those killing fields, now only grass and poppies. But this image yields an insight into the way in which many Jews today, living in lands far distant from Poland, rightly conceptualise the duty of remembering the Holocaust – that by remembering it they are to so to speak beating down those tall grasses, uncovering the blood that has seeped into the earth at Auschwitz. The fields of grass symbolise forgetfulness, the very height of the grass representing length of time, the indifferent onward growth of nature. So if Jews believe that they alone have the duty to retain their cultural memory of what happened at Auschwitz, then for them the image of an Auschwitz overgrown and covered with weeds and untended grass fits such a belief precisely. In 1989, at the height of the controversy over the presence of a group of Carmelite nuns in a building supposedly used as a storage depot for canisters of the Zyklon B gas with which the mass murder was carried out, Jewish news reports and the protests delivered by Jewish community organisations worldwide similarly did little to discourage the impression that the Carmelite convent building was simply standing on its own, right in the middle of a vast silent terrain, dominating the otherwise void Auschwitz landscape.

Even today, responsible Jewish leaders continue to urge that this building should return to its ‘correct’ post-Holocaust Auschwitz identity, namely that of silence. In the face of the *tremendum* of the Auschwitz catastrophe, they seem to say, there is no language, there is no voice, there is nothing to be said, there can be only silence. There is indeed no reason for a Jew even to visit Auschwitz, so the argument runs; land-locked, as the physical Auschwitz is, within a sea of Polish antisemitism, the best Jewish solution for its future would be simply to put a fence around the site and leave it as a *tel olam* – a biblical term for a place whose physical past should be blotted out forever.

By no means all Jews everywhere would share this image in precisely the terms I have just described it, and perhaps I have exaggerated slightly in order to make the point; but this picture is by and large the prevalent one. Auschwitz for diaspora Jews symbolically represents the ultimate nothingness, the vast pit into which European Jewry descended during the Holocaust. The need for Jewish cultural privacy to nurse the grief, to attempt to recover from the overwhelming ignominy, implies that Auschwitz should not be intruded on, that it should not be cluttered with other messages, with moral and cultural irrelevancies deriving from elsewhere – a Christian convent, for example. At best the convent is an unwelcome intruder into a world of silence; at worst it can be taken as de-Judaising and thus marginalising the very Holocaust itself, and doing so moreover on the very spot of the major massacre. The natural resistance to clutter thus sharpens and frames the Jewish image, preserves it from distortion, and in this way feeds into popular contemporary Jewish attitudes towards the Holocaust.

The empirical facts about the physical Auschwitz today stand in stark contrast to

this image. Auschwitz is no empty, lonely field of grass. Because of the speed of the Soviet military advance in early 1945, the Nazis failed to conceal their crimes at Auschwitz as had been their original intention, with the result that with the exception of the four principal gas chambers and crematoria, which were hurriedly and somewhat inefficiently dynamited, a very great number of buildings survived the war: watch towers, barracks, the electrified barbed-wire fences, the guardhouses, the railway lines. It is quite likely, as Władysław Bartoszewski has recently suggested, that this survival of the physical fabric of Auschwitz contributed in no small measure to the fact that Auschwitz became so well known after the war.¹ The death-camp at Bełżec, for example, which was totally destroyed by the Nazis, is now almost completely forgotten by Jews outside Poland, although as many as 600,000 Jews are thought to have been murdered there.² At any rate, there is not much by way of silence or solitude in Auschwitz. There is a great deal for the visitor to see in Auschwitz, and there are a great number of visitors too: in 1989 alone there were 700,000 of them, drawn from as many as 89 countries around the globe. Since the end of the war nearly 20 million people have been to visit Auschwitz. In 1947 the territory of the main Auschwitz camp, together with its extension at Auschwitz-Birkenau two miles away, was officially designated by the Polish government as a museum and so came under the authority of the Ministry of Culture.³ Today the museum employs approximately 175 people and is fully established with all the trappings one would expect of a state museum: it contains exhibitions, including exhibitions of original artefacts; it has a director and an assistant director; it has a series of departments including a historical department, a conservation department, an education department, a publications department, an archive and a library; it produces an annual report; it survives on an annual budget approved by the Ministry of Culture; it has a set of licensed guides, both full-time and part-time, and of course an official guidebook.⁴

At one level of reality, then, what Auschwitz is today is a museum. Like many Polish museums, it tends to get extremely crowded during the summer tourist season, and at this time it takes on a slightly different air – that of being a place of mass tourism. Posters advertising the day trip or half-day trip to Auschwitz are prominently displayed on billboards and in tourist kiosks in the major cities in Poland, and provision has been made for a large car park in Auschwitz for tourist coaches and private cars. Elsewhere on the Auschwitz site can be found a hotel, a cafeteria, a souvenir shop, several book shops, a cinema auditorium with its own ticket office, a left-luggage counter, a post office, a currency exchange office, a tea room, a series of public lavatories and so on. The visitor may choose from a wide variety of postcards and slides showing various Auschwitz views, such as the barracks, the ruins of the gas chambers, or the famous entry gate with its legend '*Arbeit macht frei*'; and the museum is currently completing a video film for sale to visitors so that they can show the folks back home what it was all about.

At an empirical level, Auschwitz as a place can therefore be described in at least two different, albeit related ways – as a museum and as a destination for mass tourism. Thus an ethnography of contemporary Auschwitz would include, on the one hand, a description of how the museum authorities conceptualise and prioritise various aspects of the history of the site – for example, the museum's conservation policies, or the structure of the permanent historical exhibitions that have been mounted in some of the former barracks; and, on the other, a description of the functioning and behaviour of mass tourism in relation to its impact on the site (some examples of this are given below). Each of these topics would require at least a full paper on its own

in order to convey some of the principal issues.

Not all those who visit Auschwitz are tourists. There are those who, like many Jewish visitors to Auschwitz, possess a very different preconception. These people have a preexisting image of the place as massive grassy killing fields, which is totally at variance with the empirical facts as I have described them. How can the museum cater for them? How can the museum learn from them? How can *they* learn from what they encounter in Auschwitz today? How can they salvage their sense of the ineffable of Auschwitz, while all around them they see nothing but the clutter of irrelevance? What has it got to do with their notions of Auschwitz that there is a director of an Auschwitz museum who has to produce an annual report? For them, the true realities of Auschwitz lie elsewhere, far beyond such a pedestrian, bureaucratic mode of measuring time or of charting fundamental moral questions.

It is this conflict, in short, between reality and symbol, between history and myth, between the visible and the invisible, that is the central problem about the future of Auschwitz that I should like to present in this paper. The first point to notice, then, is that both sets of elements are present in the place simultaneously, in an uneasy coexistence. But there is much more to tell before I can suggest any conclusions.

Among the hordes of day-trippers to Auschwitz there are many different kinds of people. Israelis currently number little more than one per cent of the total, and I would be surprised if diaspora Jewish visitors would bring the total number of Jews to a figure above five per cent. But certainly there is a definable minority of visitors who regard themselves in some sense as pilgrims, i.e. not primarily as tourists or as visitors to a museum. It is in recognition of this fact that the authorities have themselves made provision for a flower shop at the entrance to the museum. The shop's customers include not only the visiting official delegations who purchase large wreaths for laying at one of the monuments on the site,⁵ but also private visitors who lay small bouquets or individual flowers in more unexpected corners: both inside and outside the barracks, sometimes by the ruins of the gas chambers. These acts evidently represent personal gestures of remembrance, and perhaps are also in honour of specific individuals. Jewish visitors often light memorial candles in some of these places and recite memorial prayers. It is the existence of such simple but significant acts that confirms that Auschwitz is not a museum in the ordinary sense of the word; and it needs to be said that more of such acts are needed, in order to keep restating that truism.

What *is* Auschwitz today, if it is not a museum in the ordinary sense of the word? You cannot say that Auschwitz is a cemetery. It is not a cemetery, in the ordinary sense of *that* word. The difficulty is that in one sense of course it *is* a cemetery, inasmuch as it contains within its perimeter the last resting-place of many of those who were murdered there. Their cremated ashes were spread onto the fields at Auschwitz-Birkenau, or unceremoniously dumped into a large pond there. But they were not *ceremonially* laid to rest in the pond, nor was Auschwitz ever consecrated as a cemetery as such, either during the war or after.⁶

Auschwitz is therefore not a museum, even though it seems on the surface to be a museum; it is not a cemetery, even though it has some features of a cemetery; it is not just a tourist site, even though it is often full to overflowing with tourists. It is all these things at once.

How can this be? The answer is that the uniqueness of Auschwitz is contained in the fact that it is precisely all these things at once. We have no category in our language to describe what this place is. Certainly it possesses no single meaning for all people. What Auschwitz today consists of is a multiplicity of realities, a multiplicity of

meanings, perspectives and approaches that coexist simultaneously even though they are in direct contradiction with each other. All of its parts seem equally real and equally important, but in each case they are only part of the reality, part of its importance. It is this fundamental lack of an internal congruence of its parts, the capacity to sustain internal contradictions of this kind, that makes the empirical Auschwitz today difficult to comprehend, and so renders it open to mythologisation. The presence of contradictions in mythologised views of reality is a subject I shall be returning to later.

II

All this, therefore, is only the beginning. Once we move into the symbolic universes of Auschwitz, the picture is as dense as anything I have presented thus far. The symbolic space that Auschwitz represents is as complex and diversified as are its realities at the physical level. For Jews, Auschwitz is the symbol of the Holocaust – *the* symbol of the Holocaust, and symbolising only the Holocaust. For Poles, Auschwitz is also a symbol, but with an entirely different meaning.

For Poles, Auschwitz is the symbol not of the Holocaust as such, but of the Nazi oppression of Poland. For Poles, the historical fact that Auschwitz was first opened as a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners is of great symbolic importance. Although Auschwitz-Birkenau contained the installations of systematic mass murder (principally of Jews), the point here is that the Auschwitz concentration-camp system was administered largely for the purpose of slave labour, principally of Poles. Three million non-Jewish Poles died during the Second World War, of whom 75,000 came to be murdered in Auschwitz.⁷ As part of the wider Nazi treatment of the Polish population as a source of slave labour, Auschwitz was a specific element in the attempt at the systematic destruction of Polish culture and Polish national identity, in order eventually to provide Germany with more room to expand. From the end of the war the Auschwitz Museum presented itself in Poland not only as a communist warning regarding the evils of fascism – that of course was a particularly important political duty for the regime – but also as a symbol of the wartime attempt to crush Poland altogether out of existence. Although Jews represented 90 per cent of the victims of Auschwitz, the systematic mass murder of the Jews there, as James Young has observed in a recent book, stood for Poles not as a Jewish catastrophe as such but as something else – as a metonym or symbol of what Poles feared was to be the wider *Polish* fate.⁸ That is at least one reason why the museum never felt it necessary to state explicitly in its exhibitions that the principal victims at Auschwitz were overwhelmingly the Jews. Until very recently the museum described the identity of the victims merely as ‘people’ – men, women and children, of 28 different nations, among which Jews were just one nationality.⁹ Jews were right to complain about this, and indeed steps are being taken today to remedy this most serious omission.¹⁰ But this blatant distortion by the museum was generated in part from another source: the fact, unknown to most Jews, that Auschwitz has been treated for the past 45 years as a key symbol of the wartime Polish tragedy – so that, for example, the visit to Auschwitz became an indispensable part of the curriculum for Polish schoolchildren. Thus, in the post-war Polish construction of the symbolic meaning of Auschwitz, to identify Jews as the principal victims would have been to clutter, if not to obfuscate, the cultural and political message; it was an inconvenient irrelevance best left to one side. I do not wish to enter into the comparison but the point needs to be made: in this Polish view of Auschwitz there is something here more than just merely reminiscent

of the Jewish view of Auschwitz in which there is no room for a Christian convent.

The comparison cannot be pushed much further, if only because the Polish and Jewish experiences of Auschwitz were so totally different; nevertheless, the capacity of Auschwitz to stand as symbol for these totally different histories needs to be drawn attention to. Auschwitz on the surface is one symbol, one name; but the meaning of the symbol, the meaning of the name, is not at all uniform. It is no good saying that because more Jews than Poles were murdered in Auschwitz, therefore Auschwitz is more symbolic for Jews than it is for Poles; besides, once one starts playing the numbers game, one immediately runs up against the fact that Poles constitute well over half the total number of present-day visitors to Auschwitz. The great majority of visitors walking around the museum, then, see the place quite differently from the way in which Jewish visitors see the place.

The figures about foreign visitors to Auschwitz – some 300,000 or so in 1989 – are equally revealing. It is remarkable to observe, on the basis of this evidence, how the wartime experience of different European countries has in effect been successfully transmitted to the next generations – a fact that in itself is suggestive of a ‘future of Auschwitz’, at least as far as Auschwitz symbolism is concerned. The European countries from which the fewest number of visitors came were those, such as Britain, that were not occupied by the Germans during the war. By contrast, the largest single national groups of visitors over a number of years have been from the Soviet Union, followed by the two Germanys, followed by Yugoslavia. Auschwitz is a key symbol of what in the Soviet Union was called the Great Patriotic War, and Auschwitz is also, of course, an inescapable element of the *Hitlerzeit*, the Hitler period in modern German history. Even the different names the Russians and Germans respectively use to describe the Second World War are a clue that once again Auschwitz has a different symbolic meaning within these two other national histories. As many as 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war were murdered in Auschwitz; Soviet prisoners of war, together with Polish political prisoners, were the original human guinea-pigs in Auschwitz on whom the Nazis tried out and perfected the technique of mass murder by gassing. And it was the Soviet army that liberated Auschwitz in 1945. If we recall for a moment how comparatively well known Bergen-Belsen became in Britain because it was liberated by the British army in 1945, it is not difficult to get a sense of the symbolic significance that Auschwitz came to possess in the Soviet Union, whose national experience of Auschwitz (at least as portrayed in the official media), totally different once again from that of Jews or Poles, was that of great tragedy at the outset and that of humanitarian redemption at the close.

At any rate I hope by now the point is clear: the extraordinary collocation of so many different symbolic Auschwitzes side by side leads to a place of extraordinary complexity. I have said nothing, I know, about Auschwitz as the site of mass murder of some 20,000 Gypsies, and the role of Auschwitz as the key symbol of the genocide of the Gypsies; but the list of symbolisms could go on and on, and it is not my purpose here to explore each case in turn. What does need to be asked, however, is just how these various competing symbolisms survive *in situ*. How do you construct Auschwitz as a memorial site that does justice to the dignified memory of so many different groups whose descendants in turn perceive the place in so many different ways?

The short answer is that pilgrims will always pick their way through the jungle of cultural irrelevance to find what it is that they are looking for; the intervening countryside, so to speak, is simply ignored. Partly this is accomplished through monuments; the principal Auschwitz monument, dedicated ‘to the victims of fascism’,¹¹ is located at the end of the railway line at Auschwitz-Birkenau, in a wide,

open space immediately between the ruins of two of the four principal gas chambers and crematoria. This monument, completed in the 1960s following a major international competition for its design,¹² is in a setting suitable for large gatherings, and especially for visiting politicians and statesmen anxious to place a commemorative wreath in full view of the television cameras. But there are in addition a score of smaller monuments and plaques, largely in memory of various groups of Poles. The underground prison cell, for instance, where the Polish Franciscan Maksymilian Kolbe came to his end after sacrificing himself for another person condemned to death, has been turned into a shrine replete with candles, flowers and other Christian religious symbols – a dedication entirely in keeping with Kolbe's elevation to Catholic sainthood, which at the same time offers Polish visitors to Auschwitz the opportunity to restate their sense of national and religious identification with some of the basic meanings of Auschwitz that they have been taught to believe. There is a Soviet monument and a Gypsy monument; there are even a monument to a group of French communists and a plaque to a group of four Austrian communists. There is no Jewish monument.

I have often thought about the fact that there is no Jewish monument as such in Auschwitz, and it is a subject to which I shall return later. But I wonder whether the evident absence hitherto of a Jewish desire for a monument is not something that connects up with the image of Auschwitz that I referred to before, of an essentially void, silent landscape. There can be no monuments at a *tel olam* – by definition, the place is left to speak for itself. However, the museum has made provision for a permanent exhibition devoted entirely to Jewish martyrdom; the last room in this exhibition has been left as a sort of chapel for meditation, in which one can hear on a continuous tape a moving cantorial rendition of the *El Male Rachamim*, the Jewish prayer for the dead. Yet this isn't a monument as such, even though it serves the sociological purpose of providing Jewish visitors with a focus for their Auschwitz visit.¹³ But there is a further difficulty: the museum has authorised a series of half a dozen barracks to be used for national exhibitions, and thus there is a Polish exhibition, a Soviet exhibition, a Czechoslovak, a Bulgarian, a French, an Italian, a Belgian, an Austrian, a Dutch, a Hungarian, a Yugoslav, a Danish exhibition (and formerly also an East German one). In this context the Jewish exhibition in Block 27 represents just one more national exhibition, paralleling the presentation of Jews as just one nation alongside the 28 nations from among whom the victims were drawn – an approach to reality that is disturbing, to say the least. Still, this museological structure, faulty though it may be, does go some way to explain how the various different meanings that the Auschwitz symbol occupies in the thought of different groups are institutionalised, and how they thereby provide a bounded sense of coherence for those who need to know – at least in principle – just what Auschwitz means to them as Poles, Russians, Frenchmen, or whatever. The other side of the coin is that this structure does give an inkling that maybe, if you are a Russian, Auschwitz has different meanings for non-Russians or, if you are a Jew, there is, so to speak, more to Auschwitz than the Holocaust. Indeed, the more time one spends in Auschwitz today the more one comes to realise that Auschwitz offers the visitor an exceedingly large range of issues to ponder and to meditate on, although museologically these have not been as fully thought through as perhaps they might have been.¹⁴

Some of these preoccupations can be found most usually articulated not in the museum's exhibits but in the commentaries provided by guides, especially foreign guides accompanying tour groups around the site. Israeli tour guides, for example, wax eloquent to their groups in their explanations of Auschwitz as the ultimate

justification for the need for the state of Israel, or explain Auschwitz as a place demonstrating the ultimate futility and cultural irresponsibility of a weak and powerless diaspora Judaism. Issues such as these obviously lift the meaning of Auschwitz onto a different plane altogether; they also underline that Auschwitz has an important future as an educational tool for generations to come. Somewhat belatedly, perhaps, diaspora Jewish tour guides are just now beginning to present Auschwitz in terms of a lament for the vanished world of pre-war Eastern European Jewry – thereby echoing the longer-established view of Auschwitz as the one true cemetery of classical European civilisation, the place that symbolises the final end of the central role in the European tradition of classical values, of the preeminence of a classical education and world-view.

Thoughts on these matters have been elaborated over the past few decades in places far distant from Auschwitz itself – as if the contemporary meaning of Auschwitz is indeed best understood from a distance. Things look different when seen close up. The museum was largely conceived by (Polish Catholic) Auschwitz survivors, and its message was largely intended for the generation that had survived Auschwitz. Forty-five years on, the museum is still there, almost as in a time-warp. The elaboration of national symbolisms of Auschwitz has developed and matured, but, alongside these, newer and wider preoccupations are emerging from the generations born long after the war was over.

Once again, the list of these newer preoccupations is long, indefinitely long, and, once again, replete with internal contradictions of all kinds. Let me mention just some of the main headings. Auschwitz is about the death of God. Auschwitz is about the need to believe in God, and faith in the future redemption from tragedy and catastrophe. Auschwitz is about the nature of modern bureaucratic society that brought such evil into the world and is still doing so. Auschwitz is about human nature – could I have been a mass murderer, for example, or am I only capable of being a victim or bystander? Auschwitz is about the truth of my values and the utter falsehood of *their* values. Auschwitz is about ‘them’: others, Nazis, fascists, the Europe of the past. Auschwitz is about us, the new European future, the dream of a new Europe free of borders and free of racial or nationalistic antagonisms. Auschwitz is full of meaning, full of meanings. Auschwitz is the only place to visit to contemplate the total meaninglessness of life, the complete purposelessness of the mass murder committed there. Auschwitz belongs to all humanity; Auschwitz belongs to nobody. Auschwitz really existed, the mass murders really happened, and they happened in this actual place. Auschwitz has nothing to do with any physical sense of place, for what is important about Auschwitz is what it symbolises. Finally, although this is merely a preliminary list, Auschwitz is to be a silent, abandoned, empty field, and the last remains of its buildings should be left quietly to sink into the ground. Auschwitz is, however, a place to which all the world should come – to see, to look, to listen, to learn. The more visitors there are, the more crowded it is, the better it is – because more people are taking in its messages, are listening to their historical past. And in this way the victims are remembered; they did not die in vain.

What I have just listed is an awesome series of preoccupations and contradictions. How can the museum ever hope to unpack them all, to signpost these meanings into the long-distant future? In practice, it has hardly even started, and given the tremendous pressure it was under during the Carmelite convent controversy, it might remain reluctant for some time to venture into these new cultural domains.¹⁵ In the past four years or so, however, that challenge has been unobtrusively taken up by one group of people deeply concerned with Auschwitz, a group whose institutional base

has been carefully – and correctly – positioned outside the boundaries of the former camp.¹⁶ I refer to the Germans.

Young Germans today, acknowledging that Auschwitz is part of *their* history, are both central and peripheral to what is happening in Auschwitz nowadays. German is the single most widely spoken western language among visitors to Auschwitz; Germany is the European country with the longest experience of post-Nazi democratic education, giving that curricula in a wide range of institutions to promote this were insisted upon by the western allies after the end of the war. The irony is thus that – at least in the field of education – Germans today know more about Auschwitz, so to speak, than anyone else in the West. The one foreign institution permanently located near Auschwitz is a modern hostel erected by a German organisation whose brief is reconciliation, and it receives a steady stream of German students and teachers throughout the year. These young Germans spend as much as a week or a fortnight in Auschwitz undertaking a variety of activities, including discussion meetings, encounters with Auschwitz survivors, research in the museum's library and archive, workshops on specialised topics, and physical, hands-on conservation work such as pulling out the weeds from the ruins of the gas chambers. No day-trippers these. And so it is, within the seminar rooms of this house, run – interestingly enough – in collaboration between Germans and Poles, that the new preoccupations regarding the future of Auschwitz find their fullest local expression.

III

The time, I think, has now come for me to return more directly to the subject of the future of Auschwitz and offer some personal reflections. As we have seen, the scope of the mythologisation of Auschwitz is immense – and by mythologisation I do not mean the claims of revisionists and others that there were no gas chambers in Auschwitz, but rather the claims of so many different people to see their own Auschwitz in Auschwitz, claims which clearly represent an authentic historical view by their proponents, but which none the less distort and manipulate the complexities so as to simplify them, reduce them down, and make them more easily digestible within the systems of their own cultural and political preoccupations. As the numbness of the immediate shock of what happened at Auschwitz begins now to fade, the time has come – 45 or so years after the end of the war – to look again at Auschwitz and to challenge and recast our collective views. Particularly now that the communist regime is no longer in power in Poland, the museum will in any case feel itself able to consider afresh the meaning of the site, freed as it is from the monopoly of interpretation imposed from party headquarters. Indeed, in the autumn of 1989, within the first two months of democracy in Poland, the government took the first steps to initiate a commission specifically to look into the whole question of the future of Auschwitz. In June 1990, this commission was formally constituted as an International Council, appointed by the Polish Minister of Culture. I was given the honour of becoming a founding member of this Council, which has thus far held three meetings, all in Auschwitz itself. These are strange, deeply emotional occasions, but concerned nevertheless to find practical solutions to concrete problems. The pace of change has quickened. On account of the work the Council has set for itself, I believe it only a matter of time before the Jewish world will be asked for a collective response to the realities of present-day Auschwitz.¹⁷

Where I think the heart of the problem lies is in the relationship, as I suggested earlier, between the visible and the invisible, the recorded history and the

mythologised version of that history. Will it be possible for Jews, Poles, Russians and a host of other national and ethnic groups to face up to a remythologisation of Auschwitz in the face of new interpretations and new symbolic modes that will inexorably accrue to the place, as the generations move further away from the event? For the rewriting of history, common enough in all other spheres, is not normally set in a theatre of such emotion-laden manifestations of evil and horror. That Auschwitz deeply matters to Jews was clear from the furore over the Carmelite convent. My suspicion is that Poles will react less nervously once work is completed on the museum's new plan to restructure completely its exhibitions in such a way as to emphasise the central role of Auschwitz in the Holocaust of the Jews.¹⁸ But I may be wrong about that. The Auschwitz trajectory today – away from a close nationalistic reading of twentieth-century history, and towards a more disinterested, historically faithful representation of events – may turn out to be in the opposite direction to the new nationalistic moods current in Eastern Europe. Perhaps, for example, any new exposition of the collaboration of the Balts and the Ukrainians in the Holocaust, a subject which has hitherto remained concealed in Poland (hidden under the umbrella of socialist confraternity), will not be well received in Auschwitz by future generations of visitors from those countries. Or perhaps their youth will not be so troubled by being confronted in Auschwitz with details of the misdeeds of some of their ancestors. Whatever the reaction will be, new subjects of this kind will inevitably find their place on the future Auschwitz agenda.

It is a curious fact, little understood in the West perhaps, that many aspects of the Second World War are only just now, for the first time, coming to be comprehended in Eastern Europe; only now can certain things be spoken about freely, be researched even, after a long period of imposed silence. Anything can happen under these circumstances, as the ethnic histories come now to be totally reevaluated, and especially the complex interplay of ethnicity, nationalism and communism in Soviet and other Eastern European territories under German occupation, as well as the relationship between these factors and the deportation and mass murder of the Jewish populations there. The future of Auschwitz in this sense will probably be a reflection of these wider processes; for instance, the centrality of Auschwitz as a Polish symbol may decline once fuller knowledge of wartime Polish losses in the Soviet Union comes to be better documented (only now are some of the mass graves being dug up for the first time). Maybe Auschwitz will then come to be seen by Poles as having been artificially created as a communist-inspired symbol of the wartime Polish national tragedy, to load on to Hitler what ought properly to have been loaded on to Stalin; and indeed the trend, if anything, over the past two years is a marked decline in visitors to Auschwitz from countries of the former Soviet bloc.¹⁹ In short, once the historical truth is out that Jews constituted 90 per cent of Auschwitz victims, some restructuring of Auschwitz symbolism in Eastern Europe is bound to follow.

The Auschwitz trajectory among Jews is in a class of its own. For two generations after the war, Auschwitz was largely the subject of a *self-imposed* silence. Jewish religious leaders, for example, largely shied away from the memory of the Holocaust. They did not even attempt to introduce significant liturgical innovations.²⁰ Survivors wanted to forget; in some cases, particularly in Israel, survivors were made to feel ashamed that they had survived at all (had they been good Zionists they would have emigrated to Palestine before the war and so saved themselves all their wartime troubles). Perhaps indeed the silence, the desire to forget, derived from an overwhelming sense of shame, or from the refusal simply to think about the subject at all. Today the position has been totally reversed. The latest Jewish fashion is to go

out and find some survivors and videotape their testimony. The slogans, stereotypes, and generalisations Jews conventionally use to comprehend the Holocaust – or, as I should prefer to say, to mythologise the Holocaust – these slogans converge today on the duty to remember. Indeed the single Hebrew word *zakhor!* ('remember!') is the principal slogan used by Jewish congregations, student bodies, youth groups and the like, the motto that appears on banners at marches or demonstrations, on leaflets at commemorative meetings.

The use of such a slogan conceals other realities. Doubtless because of the epistemological effects of the long period of silence, Jews seem in general to know remarkably little about the Holocaust. There is of course a litany of familiar words, familiar names, familiar photographs, familiar selected facts and stereotypes, that together pass for knowledge of the Holocaust. But it is a symbolic, quasi-liturgical knowledge of the Holocaust, and a remarkably mythologised view of it. To take the most outstanding example, Poles are substituted for Germans; it was the Poles who were responsible for Auschwitz. After all, didn't the Poles build the Warsaw Ghetto? Why else was there a ghetto in the Polish capital, if the Poles didn't build it? And why else was Auschwitz in Poland, if the Germans hadn't counted on Polish help for the realisation of their plan to murder all the Jews of Europe? Interviewing ordinary Jews in London, New York or Buenos Aires, one can find a hundred such startling inaccuracies in the popular Jewish mind to explain and account for the Holocaust. The key factor in accounting for the Holocaust, in popular belief, is the force of Polish antisemitism; there is an almost complete disregard for the religious theories or for the historical or socioeconomic theories about Germany proposed by scholars, even by Jewish scholars. Since Poles were antisemites (so the argument goes), since the Holocaust consisted largely of the murder of the Jews of Poland and since the Holocaust itself took place *in* Poland, therefore the Poles were responsible. The logic of course is wrong, and the facts are wrong (although there certainly are *some* elements of truth in them). The facts are that there were no ghettos (legally enforced ghettos) in pre-war Poland until the Germans came and built them; Auschwitz was in German-annexed territory, i.e. inside the Third Reich and not in Poland (which in any case did not exist as a sovereign country during the Second World War); the Germans intended to destroy Poland, and certainly there is no evidence that the SS felt that they had to rely on Polish help to implement the Final Solution.²¹

Far from constituting a factual basis for the modern Jewish historical contemplation of how Auschwitz ever came about at all, such data are barely even admitted to. This might be intelligible if such facts had been displaced in the popular mind by other, historically faithful sets of facts, even of an impoverished kind, such as what one might call a Jewish schoolboy knowledge of Auschwitz. One might speculate as to what such knowledge would contain: for example, that nearly half of the Jews murdered in Auschwitz were Hungarian; that the one and only uprising that took place during the entire history of the camp (in October 1944) was organised and led by a group of Jews from the Sonderkommando of Crematorium no. 4, and succeeded in putting it completely out of action; or that the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Hoess, was put on trial in a Polish court after the war and subsequently executed on a specially constructed gallows in Auschwitz, outside his former office. It might be intelligible if at least a Jewish schoolboy knowledge of this kind were widespread, and passed for Jewish knowledge about Auschwitz. But not even these facts are widely known among Jews.

It is, I think, worthy of note that a people that suffered such extraordinary catastrophe has not made it its business to know the Holocaust thoroughly, but relies

rather on mythologised explanations.²² Mythologised thinking is of course a completely different mode of thinking from ordinary rational discourse. It seems to be invoked when the event is of such importance that ordinary discussion of it, with the use of common-sense rational explanations, is either impossible or inappropriate. By being placed on a level less amenable to ordinary discussion the subject has in this way been able to enter the level of collective Jewish consciousness and thus become unassailable by usual modes of critical scrutiny. The inversion and substitution of Poles for Germans is an affront to rational discourse about the Holocaust, but the popular Jewish discourse about the Holocaust is mythological, not rational. Literality is not the prevailing mode. In the contemporary Jewish discourse about the Holocaust, it is common – and in this sense indeed ‘normal’ – to find many other examples of events and places switched around, cause and effect inverted, and of course the emergence of taboos whose specific function is precisely to take the subject away from the domain of ordinary discussion (for example, the taboo on the role of Jewish collaborators during the Holocaust).

I do not know how it came to be that a western Jewish interest in the Holocaust – and the desire to remember, rather than to forget – surfaced so powerfully in recent years, reversing former trends, although it is in the nature of mythologisation to contain contradictions without attracting too much attention. Perhaps the new trend has something to do with the ageing of the generation of survivors, a decline of enthusiasm for migration to Israel, and/or the capacity of Holocaust contemplation to provide a new basis for secular Jewish self-identification, especially in countries where there is little significant antisemitism. Without such knowledge of how this new trend has come about it is difficult to predict the future course of the new Jewish awareness of the Holocaust. Certainly the old image of a void, silent Auschwitz landscape is intelligible, given the mythologised nature of popular Jewish images of the Holocaust such as I have described. It is going to be difficult to dislodge it. The silence view still has its strong supporters, notably among those still engaged in discussion with the church authorities about the future of the Carmelite convent building.²³ My own view is that the Jewish politics over this building were misguided from the start. They derived, at least in part, from a lack of familiarity with the Auschwitz realities: the building is one of many hundreds on the site, rather than (as I fear it was imagined) presiding over a lonely, empty field. The Jewish politicians in effect took their own myth of the place as their charter for action. But what will happen now is that the Catholic authorities, under Jewish pressure, will indeed construct a new convent 500 yards from the former camp, but this time the convent will be attached to a major new Catholic centre, fully equipped with conference facilities, a library, a pilgrim hostel and a restaurant.²⁴ This time the Jewish presence will truly be marginalised in Auschwitz (at least, on the basis of the definition thereof used at the beginning of the affair), but this situation will have come about as the consequence of Jewish political pressure that in turn derived from the reliance on a symbolic vision of Auschwitz lacking congruence with the existence of other realities.

What can be done? The key, as I have suggested, lies in the direction of what I have called the Auschwitz trajectory. My feeling is that the general direction of Auschwitz meanings in the future lies in a steady dissipation of the assumption that cultural irrelevancies clutter the image. That is to say, the Auschwitz symbolism of the future may well be less concerned with national or nationalist representations of history, than (on the German model) with wider universalistic issues concerning the nature of evil, i.e. the moral, spiritual, and educational problems as they affect humanity in general.²⁵ The question is whether, under such circumstances, Jews will be there to

offer their own contribution to the meanings of Auschwitz, or whether they will still feel the need to shut out anything that clutters up the uniqueness of the Holocaust. I don't for a moment believe, nor would I advocate, that the ideas about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, or indeed any national history of which Auschwitz is the symbol, should fade out; on the contrary, what I believe, and what I should like to advocate, is that these concepts of history are regenerated and indeed rejuvenated through contact with other Auschwitz representations. The model, if you like, is that of inter-faith dialogue: each should remain honest unto itself, conscious of preserving its own tradition, but nevertheless enhanced, enriched and deepened through contact with the other and awareness of it.

What I have said also applies to the museum itself. The museum authorities are in the first instance those charged with the responsibility for the maintenance of the site,²⁶ and indeed the selfless dedication of the remarkable men and women who actually work there and face the horrors every working day of their lives demands the uncritical admiration of anyone even the remotest bit concerned about the future of Auschwitz. These people consider it their duty to explore, expound and conserve the tiniest historical details of what happened in Auschwitz. But sometimes one gets the feeling that it has become an obsession: visitors are bombarded with details about the number of bodies the various crematoria could burn per hour, the precise date on which Jews first arrived in Auschwitz from Holland, the exact buildings in which Gypsies were incarcerated before being gassed, the specific colour of the cloth triangles with which homosexuals were identified in the labour camp, and so on. It is true, it should be said, that most visitors would probably not have thought about the fact that Auschwitz has its own internal history, that it developed and expanded in complex ways, from the arrival of the first trainload of Polish political prisoners in 1940 down to the systematic mass murder of Hungarian Jews in 1944 – and to that extent, there is no doubt about the considerable educational value of much of the museum's research efforts. But what the museum also needs is a good dose of mythology, to go some way towards presenting the deeper issues, and to do so in ways that visitors can more immediately relate to. The nature of the symbol does not normally allow for internal differentiation; things happened here, and it is not always important to know precisely when or where. Beneath the welter of historical information the visitor has to struggle to grasp the essentials.

So what I am advocating is a two-way process: that the mythologisations be reinvigorated and restructured by closer attention to disinterested historical fact, and that the museum authorities maintain their commitment to look more closely at the preoccupations of their visitors.²⁷ It is in this way that the dichotomy that I started with, between history and myth, reality and symbol, the visible and the invisible, can slowly be transcended for the greater good.

IV

Let me, in coming to my conclusions, be specific. It seems to me that it should be important for Jews to reinvigorate their knowledge of Auschwitz. This reinvigoration means that it should be relevant to Jews, critically relevant, to understand and respond to the existence of others on the site of their greatest single diaspora catastrophe. Maybe some of the things that happen in Auschwitz today Jews will continue to object to: there are two other churches dominating the site, in addition to the Carmelite convent, which may give some Jews cause for concern, although why nothing has been said about *them* until now is not at all clear.

I am not advocating that the Jewish response should be to criticise the behaviour of others; on the contrary. The key question, surely, is what to do to ensure, from a Jewish point of view, that Auschwitz is sacralised, rather than left to rot. I find it un-Jewish that there is no Jewish monument in Auschwitz. How can it be that somewhere in the region of one million Jewish men, women and children (we shall never know the exact number)²⁸ were murdered in Auschwitz without trace, and that there is not a single tombstone to commemorate a single one of them? Jewish tradition prescribes the duty to put up a stone in memory of anyone who dies, and to do so on the site of his or her last resting-place. I suppose that this extraordinary, unparalleled structural amnesia on the part of the Jews of the post-war generation, which consigns the Jewish dead of Auschwitz to nameless oblivion, can, once again, derive only from the prior belief that Auschwitz (as well as the other death camps) must remain a total void and place of silence. Perhaps, in addition, western Jews have tried to distance themselves from their Eastern European origins, or indeed from anything too specifically Eastern European. But then what about the Jews of Holland and France, for example, who were murdered in Auschwitz in such large numbers? The absence of tombstones means that we don't remember the names, that we don't recall the virtues of those who died or of the communities from which they came, and that we are not engaged in acts of *nichum*, consolation, that might in turn deepen our humility in the face of the great unknown.

I think, in short, that part of Auschwitz should be treated as a cemetery, at which people wishing to commemorate those individuals and communities murdered in Auschwitz could be invited to lay their tombstones, say their prayers, find their consolations, observe their silences. Apart from anything else, this would have the effect of sacralising the ground, sacralising part of the Auschwitz space, and thereby institutionalising the link between the events of Auschwitz, the memorial ground of Auschwitz, and ourselves.

There is already a 'cemetery' at Auschwitz, in any case, in that part of Auschwitz-Birkenau where human ashes were spread on to the fields and dumped into a pond. The museum, in its literalist way, has erected at these places information plaques in four languages prosaically recording these historical facts – but this on its own is not enough. The museum presents Auschwitz-Birkenau in terms of its historical expansion and development, a museological technique that despite certain advantages misses here the basic structure of the camp. At the entry is the famous guardhouse, through which the railway tracks ran. Just inside the area of the camp, to the left and right, on either side of the railway, were the barracks of prisoners engaged in forced labour. At the end of the line, to the left and right, were two gas chambers and crematoria, each surrounded by its own electrified barbed-wire fence. These were the areas of murder and death, clearly separated and fenced off from the land of the living. Further beyond, again separately fenced, is the area where the baggage that the prisoners brought with them was sorted, and the loot recycled for German use. And beyond that, beyond another pair of gas chambers and crematoria, lie the fields of ashes. A cemetery here, in other words, would not be more than one element of the whole, but a necessary element.

Inasmuch as Auschwitz consists of many enclosed parts, many self-contained symbolisms, many bounded sets of meanings, the element of cemetery has not yet been clearly stated in the monuments present on the site, and I think it should be. For surely a concrete representation of a sense of mourning and loss should in any case constitute part of the total visual, moral and architectural environment of Auschwitz. One can visualise an annual remembrance, say during the first week of the month of

Av, the period of mourning for national Jewish catastrophe, in which candles would be lit – even six million of them – along the whole length of the railway track, past the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria, and then beyond into the newly constituted cemetery. Such a remembrance, by passing through and across the different elements of the Auschwitz-Birkenau terrain, would enable us better to perceive and understand the different elements of Auschwitz meanings, their relationship with each other and our relationship with the dead.

There are other obvious suggestions to be made, notably the need for a Jewish house of some kind, perhaps on the German model, which would offer privacy for prayer, contemplation and study, and also the opportunity for young Jews to meet young Germans and young Poles in a spirit of mutual understanding and reconciliation. An Auschwitz Institute for Holocaust Studies, perhaps? The old town of Auschwitz, some two miles from the main camp, had a majority of its population Jewish before the war, and so perhaps a former Jewish building could be used for the purpose. There are, incidentally, at least two synagogue buildings still standing in the old town centre. Their survival is both ironic and symbolic.²⁹

I put forward these suggestions merely as pointers for the opening of the wider discussion. To turn the phrase horribly around, there can be no final solution of what should be the future of Auschwitz. What matters more is the need for a sense of debate, to roll back the old Jewish boundaries and taboos surrounding our collective helplessness and incapacity for positive action, and to grope some way forward in this darkened terrain.

V

I began by quoting Job, a verse that might well appear as the new inscription on the monument at Auschwitz-Birkenau.³⁰ Let me end by quoting from the book of Psalms. In the memorial prayer still recited by Ashkenazi Jews for the medieval Jewish communities massacred in the Rhineland by the advancing crusaders, half the text concerns itself with the subject of revenge. Psalm 79 is quoted: ‘Wherefore should the nations say, “Where is their God?” So let the revenge for the spilled blood of your servants be made known among the nations before our eyes.’ I do not wish to conclude this lecture with a call for revenge; far from it. But what this sentence means is something very powerful. It was the great nineteenth-century German rabbinical scholar, Samson Raphael Hirsch, who pointed out that the translation is wrong and impossible, given the nature of Hebrew grammar. *Yivvada. . . le’eineinu niqmat dam avadekha hashafukh* cannot mean ‘may the *revenge* be made known’, because then the Hebrew would have to read *tivvada*, not *yivvada*. What the psalmist is concerned about is God; and what he says should be made known among the nations is the God that they are asking about, not the revenge at all. Hence the correct translation of the verse is this: ‘Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Let Him [i.e. let God, the Jewish message] be recognised among the nations before our eyes, as vengeance for the blood of your servants that has been shed.’³¹ In other words, what constitutes the true atonement, the true vengeance, for those Jews who were murdered is that the Jewish message should be known among the nations: only by speaking to the nations a Jewish message will it be possible for us to be satisfied that those who were murdered did not die in vain.

Auschwitz, then, is no mere symbol, and the future of Auschwitz no mere abstraction: it is a real place with real challenges for Jews and Gentiles in the contemporary world.

Notes and References

¹ See Władysław Bartoszewski, *The Convent at Auschwitz* (The Bowerdean Press, London, 1990), p. 13. Other factors can be suggested as well; for example, the relatively great number of people who survived Auschwitz, as compared with other concentration camps (it is thought that only three persons survived Bełżec).

² For the Bełżec figure see Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (Collins: London, 1986), p. 502.

³ The boundaries of the territory administered by the museum (which includes in addition one mass grave, for prisoners who died shortly after liberation) constitute a complex issue in itself, as became clear during the Carmelite convent affair. Was the building a part of the museum or not? Legal, historical and ‘symbolic’ usages differ with regard to what is meant by ‘Auschwitz’. Strictly speaking, Auschwitz comprised a series of some 40 concentration camps, administered by a base camp surrounded by a special zone of about 15 square miles that lay immediately to the west and south-west of the town of Oświęcim (renamed Auschwitz by the Germans). Today, however, the topographic reference has shrunk: ‘Auschwitz’ is commonly used to refer only to specific parts of this complex, i.e. those parts that have in effect come to be conventionally associated topographically as symbolic of the horrors perpetrated. In some usages this means the base camp (and occasionally also certain buildings in its immediate vicinity, such as the building in which the Carmelite convent is located). In other usages (especially in Jewish contexts), it means the extension at Birkenau, referred to here as Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the principal gas chambers and crematoria were located – the rest of the Auschwitz complex being labour camps. In yet other usages (as in this paper) Auschwitz means both places taken together (with or without the intervening two miles of terrain), whether or not a specific topographic reference is intended.

In other words, there are specific parts of Auschwitz that do not fall under the aegis of the museum (the old railway ramp, for instance, or Auschwitz-Monowitz), and so in that sense the museum territory merely represents Auschwitz, rather than being physically expressive of its totality. Just as in many other former concentration camps that are now museums (at Dachau, for example), there are quite a number of places (SS barracks, or the homes of the commandants, to take two notable examples) that in historical terms have important associations with Auschwitz but that are treated and in fact lived in today as ‘ordinary’ buildings – although the museum does consider it to be its duty to erect commemorative plaques in some of these places.

In practice, however, the Auschwitz Museum is usually thought of as coextensive just with the base camp, since all the buildings within its perimeter fence survived the war (in Auschwitz-Birkenau, very many did not), with the result that this is where the museum installed its offices and principal exhibitions. On local signposts, and for most tourism purposes, the ‘museum’ means the base camp along; the encouragement of ordinary tourism to Auschwitz-Birkenau is still a vexed question.

⁴ The data on Auschwitz discussed in this paper, such as the figures for visitors given here, are all drawn from observations made during anthropological fieldwork I conducted at Auschwitz during the summers of 1988–91, official museum publications and internal reports, and the proceedings of the International Auschwitz Council. I should like to express my most grateful thanks to the David Lewis Charitable Foundation, which sponsored my fieldwork visits to Poland, and to the staff of the museum who assisted me in many ways during the course of my research.

⁵ The ‘site’ for this purpose means both the Auschwitz base camp and Auschwitz-Birkenau (see note 3). In the former, the so-called ‘wall of death’ (which was the principal place of execution by shooting for prisoners in the labour camp) has in effect become a monument because wreaths are conventionally laid there (and candles are also lit there on All Souls’ Day); apart from a discreet set of flagpoles and a pair of wrought-iron gates leading to the courtyard in front of the wall, there is little else that marks out this place architecturally as a monument. The main monument at Auschwitz-Birkenau, on the other hand, was specifically constructed as such. The actual locations within Auschwitz where wreaths are

normally laid can be said to represent a shrinkage of the totality: that is to say, these two locations act as symbolic of the whole, as if they stood metonymically for the two camps in which they are found. The process is similar, therefore, to the mode in which the museum itself is metonymic of the totality of Auschwitz. See also note 12.

- ⁶ There is an interesting terminological problem here: Jews often refer to Poland today as 'just one big cemetery', and Auschwitz likewise. What do they mean by this? Presumably (at least in the former case) this usage is not intended to be technical but rather to express the general awareness of the absence of living Jewish communities, in contrast with their extraordinary vitality, diversity, and sheer size before the war. It is possible that the reference to Auschwitz as a cemetery is merely an extension of this idea, although clearly this usage is problematic: on the one hand it has not been traditional for Jews to perpetuate the memory of sites of massacre; on the other hand, the feeling is perhaps that Auschwitz is an exceptional (symbolic) case, where the term 'cemetery' merely implies some ill-defined notion that its dead ought somehow to be commemorated.
- ⁷ For a detailed recent study on the numbers of Jews, Poles, Russians, Gypsies and members of other nationalities murdered in Auschwitz, see Franciszek Piper, 'Estimating the number of deportees to and victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp', *Yad Vashem Studies*, no. 21 (1991), pp. 49–103. Dr Piper is the head of the historical department of the Auschwitz State Museum.
- ⁸ See James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences on Interpretation* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990), pp. 176–7. 'The Poles' own destruction', he writes, 'is recalled in Jewish terms: one set of victims comes to represent the other.'
- ⁹ 'In KL Auschwitz', according to a Polish publication about the museum as recent as 1985, 'there were prisoners of various nationalities, creeds and professions. They included Americans, Austrians, Belgians, Britons, Bulgarians, Chinese, Croats, Czechs, Dutchmen, Egyptians, Frenchmen, Germans, Greeks, Gypsies, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, Letts, Lithuanians, Norwegians, Persians, Poles, Romanians, Russians (and other citizens of the Soviet Union), Slovaks, Spaniards, Swiss, Turks and Yugoslavs' (Tadeusz Iwaszko, 'The Prisoners', in *Auschwitz: Nazi Extermination Camp* (no editor given) (Interpress, Warsaw, 1985), pp. 47–85, at p. 63). The museum exhibitions, as well as Polish publications of the period, have failed to make it clear that Jews constituted 90 per cent of the victims, i.e. that the overwhelming majority of the different nationals listed were Jewish. The intention (presumably following conventional communist and Soviet historiography) was clearly to avoid the subject altogether, alphabetisation of the nationalities being a useful device here. The list conceals other assumptions as well: for example, the distinction between Croats and Yugoslavs, or that between the Balts and other Soviet citizens; and of course the reference to 'nationalities, creeds and professions' conceals the difference that might have been proposed between victims of genocide (Jews, Gypsies), victims of cultural genocide (Poles), prisoners of war (e.g. Soviet citizens, Britons) and others.
- ¹⁰ See note 18.
- ¹¹ I do not know why the term 'fascism', which is often found offensive by Italian visitors, was chosen here. In socialist Poland, terms such as 'Hitlerism' or 'Hitlerite fascism' were more common in such contexts.
- ¹² The competition is described in detail in Jochen Spielmann, *Entwürfe zur Sinngebung des Sinnlosen. Zu einer Theorie des Denkmals als Manifestation des 'kulturellen Gedächtnisses': Der Wettbewerb für ein Denkmal für Auschwitz*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Free University of Berlin, 1990. One relatively unknown intellectual circle that has gone into the whole subject of the post-war empirical reality of Auschwitz (and other former concentration camps) are the artists and art historians – whether as analysts, as entrants in the international competitions for suitable monuments, or as judges of those competitions. How these places have been memorialised through the erection of monuments (or otherwise 'preserved' through conservation or other environmental programmes) is seen in this perspective quite definitely as part of their total history – and this would include the

fascinating and seemingly endless list of proposals for monuments etc. that never actually came about, for one reason or another. In deciding on a particular monument or style of monument, there were of course many complex issues, starting with the basic question of what the site 'means'. How does one develop an eye for understanding the significance of a site of mass murder? Can the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria be presumed to speak for themselves (should these buildings be reconstructed, or is the Nazi attempt to destroy them completely part of the history of the site?). Given that there is little or no wider artistic tradition for representing *in situ* the notion of *Vernichtung*, the disappearance of human beings without trace, the problem for the creators of these monuments was immense: what they were being asked to do was in effect to find an artistic solution for the future of Auschwitz. In the end, a highly abstract sculpture was chosen for the monument at Auschwitz-Birkenau: it probably says little to most visitors today, but then art should perhaps in any case be expected to point beyond itself, rather than be assumed to contain all meanings within itself.

For further material on these themes see Detlef Hoffmann *et al.*, *Vergegenständlichte Erinnerung* (discussion paper), (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen, 1991); Robert Jan van Pelt, 'After the walls have fallen down', *Queen's Quarterly* vol. 96, no. 3 (1989), pp. 641–60, and his Chapter 9 ('Apocalyptic abjection') in (with Carroll William Westfall) *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1991).

- ¹³ Putting an inscription in its visitors' book is very popular and in that sense constitutes an integral part of the visit. Study of these inscriptions would be an interesting exercise in its own right.
- ¹⁴ Some obvious examples that come to mind would include exhibitions on the SS state (the bureaucracy of mass murder, the banality of evil), women in Auschwitz, children in Auschwitz, religious life among prisoners in Auschwitz, or the moral and social dilemmas of individuals caught up in the circumstances of mass deportation and murder. In effect, the category of 'Holocaust' needs to be unpacked along lines such as these: rather than constituting just one single category or single 'event', the Holocaust at Auschwitz (of both Jews and non-Jews) could be museologically presented as being approachable from a variety of perspectives and consist of an indefinitely large number of separate social and moral events.
- ¹⁵ The traps are many: for example, how to express the barbaric aspect of modern civilisation without rendering it unacceptably familiar or 'normal', and at the same time avoiding the presentation of what would amount to a pornography of violence.
- ¹⁶ The building that has been constructed is on land that is not only outside the area of the former camps but also outside the special Auschwitz zone that surrounded the camps.
- ¹⁷ It remains to be seen how far the Council will exercise wider moral authority in making decisions about how Auschwitz should look in the future. It is not clear, for example, what constitutes an Auschwitz 'expert' (i.e. what 'qualifications' would be expected of those to be invited to become members of the Council), although in practice the assumption is largely that Auschwitz survivors are the most suitable and knowledgeable. This is obviously not going to remain a working criterion for the longer-term future, quite apart from whether it is the best criterion for today's purposes. The Council has a Jewish vice-president (Dr Yisrael Gutman, of Yad Vashem), and a number of Jewish members.
- ¹⁸ An outline of this proposal, drawn up by two senior members of the museum staff, was submitted to the International Auschwitz Council in 1990. It is part of a much wider plan, which is to include: the preparation of a new official guidebook that will specifically stress the fate of Jews in Auschwitz (an interim version of this was in fact printed in the spring of 1991); appropriate reference to Jews (hitherto omitted) on the inscriptions at the main international monument in Auschwitz-Birkenau (though see also note 30); and various other plaques and inscriptions.
- ¹⁹ One should not of course read too much into the figures of Auschwitz visitors, influenced as they obviously are by factors governing tourism to Poland generally; but the trend as

- described here is unmistakable. The steep rise of visitors from the USA is particularly noticeable; and there is a small but steady growth in visitors from Japan (a Japanese-language guidebook to Auschwitz was printed by the museum for the first time in 1991), whose interest in Auschwitz – cognitively linked to Hiroshima and Nagasaki – will doubtless pose new types of questions in the future.
- ²⁰ The Israeli rabbinate, for example, merely added in Holocaust references to an existing religious fast day. Hence the institution (first proposed in 1951) of an annual Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel was from the outset framed as being of national, rather than religious, significance, as noted by Young (*op. cit.*, pp. 185ff.). In this context it became possible to connect Holocaust remembrance with Israel's national concerns (Jewish resistance, for example): the day is officially called Yom Hashoah Vehagevurah ('Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day'; emphasis added). There is a sense here in which this process is analytically comparable, perhaps, with the way the 'fascist' crimes committed at Auschwitz were treated as of ideologically political significance in socialist Poland (as elsewhere in the former socialist bloc; for example, at Buchenwald in eastern Germany). It is worth noting that the decision of the Polish parliament in 1947 to treat the grounds of Auschwitz as a permanent memorial to what happened there referred to the place as a 'monument to the martyrdom and struggle of the Polish and other nations' (emphasis added).
- ²¹ For example, there was no Polish quisling government. The case of the Ukrainians (from among whom an SS division was formed) is quite another matter. But despite much scholarly work on the very different circumstances of the different countries under German occupation, popular Jewish knowledge of the Holocaust does not normally include any significant differentiation between Poles and Ukrainians. In this respect the Jewish stereotype here also leans on a wider general lack of differentiation by Jews today between ethnic Poles, Ukrainians, Ruthenians, Belorussians etc. as far as (say) their image of pre-war antisemitism is concerned (of course, some Holocaust survivors or pre-war Jewish émigrés from the relevant territories would doubtless preserve many distinctions that have otherwise come to be lost). It remains to be seen whether this will continue to be the case as and when the new reevaluations of ethnic histories by these groups come to be more widely known.
- ²² It is also, of course, worthy of note that the Jews are by no means alone in this: there are very substantial areas of European cultural and intellectual life that have hardly even begun to absorb the reality of the Holocaust, let alone its implications. The glaring paucity of significant responses in the various fields of social science is an important example of this, as has been passionately argued by Zygmunt Bauman in his *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Polity Press, Oxford, 1989).
- ²³ According to Théo Klein, one of the principal Jewish negotiators throughout the affair (see his *L'Affaire du Carmel d'Auschwitz* (Jacques Bertoin, Paris, 1991), it is essential that the building remain 'silent' once the nuns have left (personal communication). Silence, however, can imply many different things, from a simple interdiction on speech to a more abstract notion reflecting a sense of oblivion, the intrinsic incommunicability of the meaning of the place. During the height of the controversy the whole question of the future of the building once the nuns had left was never properly examined – and it is not clear even now just what would be considered suitable by the Jewish negotiators. If silence derives (in part, at least) from the inability to find (the right) words, then the evident challenge to the educational role of the museum in the future is a substantial one.
- ²⁴ The whole complex is under construction at the date of writing (October 1991).
- ²⁵ As a reflection, perhaps, of the new mood one can point to a growing awareness of the problematics of conventional terminology – for instance, the unthinking use of Nazi terms (such as 'extermination') or the question of how to refer to the identity of those murdered (as 'victims?').
- ²⁶ And of course for the huge financial implications, especially as far as conservation is concerned – a massive task, given the hundreds of buildings still standing within the

museum's grounds. It remains to be seen whether outside agencies will share this burden.

²⁷ See note 18, as far as Jewish issues are concerned. Attention to the interests of other groups should, of course, also be envisaged.

²⁸ See Piper, *op. cit.*, for a full discussion of the problem.

²⁹ One of these buildings contains a fine stone *shivviti* (a traditional votive tablet often placed in synagogues in front of the reader's lectern, containing an appropriate biblical citation principally to remind him to keep his religious concentration). It dates from 1904. There is something particularly poignant about the survival of such an inscription a mere stone's throw from the Auschwitz camp.

³⁰ In early 1990, the director of the museum ordered the removal of the inscriptions at the foot of the monument. They contained a simple dedication repeated in 19 different languages, in memory of the 'four million' men, women and children who had died in Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945. The action of the museum director to remove these plaques was based on the decision finally to recognise that the figure of four million did not correspond with the figure assumed by internationally respected historians, and indeed by the museum's own head of historical research (see Piper, *op. cit.*). However, the problem then arose as to what a new inscription ought to contain, and the International Auschwitz Council has been debating the matter (without formal result thus far, though it is likely that the verse from Job will appear in it somewhere). The subject is discussed in detail in my article, 'Creating a new inscription for the memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau: a short chapter in the mythologization of the Holocaust', in Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston (eds), *The Sociology of Sacred Texts* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

There would appear to be a fundamental dichotomy between two types of inscription: a commemorative type, which in effect laments the victims, and an informational type, which offers the contemporary visitor historical background about what happened on the site. The old inscriptions (whatever can be said about their inaccuracy over the figures) clearly belonged to the former type; they were in 19 languages, ostensibly because the victims of Auschwitz spanned this number of languages (although again the details here could be debated). Today, however, the feeling of the Council is that there is an overriding need for inscriptions to provide information for visitors: for example, the historical facts about the Jewish identity of the victims, hitherto not stated explicitly (see notes 9 and 18). If this also leads (as one would logically expect) to the languages of the inscriptions being chosen so as to address the visitors – if, say, only Polish, English, Russian and German are used – the net effect will be to distance the inscriptions from the victims as such. The old inscriptions, and their languages, spoke on their behalf. With informational inscriptions, the victims themselves seem to recede into the historical background: they have become objectified. While this dichotomy is perhaps not insuperable, it is worth noting that it is paralleled by the difference (noted above in the text) between a perception of the meaning of Auschwitz as a lament for those who were destroyed by the Nazis, on the one hand, and a perception of the meaning of Auschwitz as the need for the continuing search, long into the future, for its universal lessons and significance, on the other.

³¹ The text of this prayer can be found in any standard Ashkenazi liturgy; it is recited on sabbath mornings. For Hirsch's commentary, see Samson Raphael Hirsch (trans.), *Seder Tefilloth Yisrael: the Order of Prayers for the Whole Year* (Feldheim, Jerusalem and New York, 1972), pp. 350–3.