

Betrayal or Portrayal of Memory?

Remembering/Recording the Events of the Holocaust in the City of Czestochowa Through the Lens of Docofiction

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Introduction

The topic of how to write Holocaust fiction, indeed, whether one should write Holocaust fiction, is a contentious one. Within this workshop, I will address this issue, drawing on my experience, both in research (primary and secondary) and with the writing of a novel (docofiction) about the events of the Holocaust in the Polish city of Czestochowa. This work is part of my PhD. The genre in question is that of documentary fiction (docofiction, or faction).

Two questions to bear in mind:

1. Can one who was not there write accurately of the events?

and

2. How does one respect the memory/integrity of both victim and survivor?

Czestochowa: a city with a hidden/buried story (the name means 'to hide often')

'My purpose and aspirations as a writer are not to build but to try to rebuild a vanished universe; instead of creating characters and situations, I try to re-create them book by book, story by story, tale by tale.'¹

'to try to rebuild a vanished universe'

In this paper, I wish to draw on Wiesel's concept of 'builder', in reference to my writing. Let us hold in our heads an image of a building or construction site: at most building sites, debris, concrete, perhaps old bricks and planks of wood, need to be cleared away before the building can begin. We could call this the preparation stage. Perhaps some of the items are salvageable, set aside as material for use in the construction of the new building.

To 'rebuild', 'reconstruct', make visible'...

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence* 1:370, cited in David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel* (University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, 1992), p.123

This is what I have hoped to do (and continue to hope to do...the writing is still in progress).

‘When the Holocaust is the theme, history imposes limitations on the supposed flexibility of artistic license. We are confronted by the perplexing challenge of the reversal of normal creative procedure: instead of Holocaust fictions liberating the facts and expanding the range of their implications, Holocaust facts enclose the fictions, drawing the reader into an ever-narrower area of association...’²

‘To write a Holocaust novel is to respond to one who summons from the other side of a mountain of ashes, one who asks, “What have you made of me?” The voice that calls forth the creative process inevitably appears in the work created.’³

Let me begin at the beginning (as most stories do!)

Part One: the cleared site.

Czestochowa. A city in Poland.

A city formed, and bound by, a common history and two different faiths.

Czestochowa is located about 125 miles (200 kms) south-west of Warsaw. It had its beginnings as a village called Czenstochowka. Due to the establishment of a monastery in the 14th century (Jasna Gora) the village developed into a city. In 1793 the city was annexed by Prussia. In 1806 the Polish army of the Duchy of Warsaw reconquered the city. After the Congress of Vienna, in 1815, Czestochowa remained within the borders of the Polish Kingdom.

The city became an important and wealthy industrial centre. In 1877 there were factories for making candles, soap, lime bricks, wall paper and other products, including toys and other celluloid products (Jews were pioneers in this field). Iron foundries, textile mills and the steel industry flourished here. On the banks of the Warta River were rich deposits of ore, which formed the basis for the steelworks. Roads and railways were constructed in the region.

The exact date of Jewish settlement has not been historically established, yet it is highly probable that the Jewish community in Czestochowa was founded around 1765 and consisted of 75 people. The Jewish population grew to 500 in 1808, and 50 years later to 3,000 (In the Census of 1897, there were 12,000 Jews listed (total population 45,000): 2,155 working in industry and handicraft, 800 tailors and the rest in small shops and factories).. When World War 11 broke out, there were 28,500 Jews (a third of the total population) living in the city The Jewish population was involved in the industrial life, as well as in banking, domestic and international trade and crafts. There were secular and religious Jewish schools, as well as a trade school and a Jewish agricultural training farm (both the trade school and the farm operated during the inter-war period

As participation of Jews in Czestochowa’s economic life increased, so did antisemitism. There was a pogrom in 1902. Between the two World Wars, the anti-Jewish policy of

² Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1995),p.75

³ Patterson, op.cit; p.58

the government in the political and economic fields, combined with heavy taxation and economic restrictions, hit the Jewish community hard. 'This was so because the Christian population in Czestochowa was strongly under the influence of the local Catholic clergy. Thus, for example, there was a permanent boycott against those Jewish businesses which produced Christian religious objects.'⁴ There were two more pogroms, in 1919 and 1937 with loss of both life and property. From this time until the outbreak of World War II, the Jews of Czestochowa lived in an atmosphere of heightened antisemitism.

When the Germans entered the city on September 3, 1939, persecution of Jews began at once. One of the measures included the establishment of a ghetto in 1941. Jews from other cities and villages (approximately 20,000) were sent to this ghetto, which eventually numbered over 48,000 Jews. 39,000 were sent to Treblinka during the liquidation of the ghetto.

Our Lady of Czestochowa (the icon, the *Black Madonna* at Jasna Gora 'bright hill')

It is the greatest religious treasure of the people of Poland. This miraculous icon has occupied a unique position in the religious, political and social life of Poland for over six centuries.

According to tradition, the icon was painted by St Luke, on wood prepared by St Joseph of Nazareth. Legend has it that after Jesus' death, Mary went to live with St John. She took with her a table which Jesus had made for her in the carpenter's workshop in Nazareth. St Luke painted the portrait of the Virgin Mary on the table top. From here the beam of wood, with the icon painted on it, went to Jerusalem and Constantinople, then to Belz and then in 1382 it was brought to the Jasna Gora monastery, near Czestochowa, by Ludwig 1st of Hungary, where the Pauline Fathers were entrusted with guarding the picture.

In 1430 the shrine was invaded and plundered. The bandits, from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, removed the picture from the altar and tried to destroy it, breaking the wooden boards that backed the painting and slashing the canvas with a sword-hence the marks on the icon. Tradition states that when the picture has been restored, the wounds always reappear.

After the Jasna Gora monastery withstood the Swedish siege in 1655, the icon was declared Queen of Poland. King Jan Casimir consecrated his lands to the protection of the icon, thus linking the nation and the portrait:

'I, Jan Casimir, King of Poland, take thee as Queen and patroness of my Kingdom. I place my people, and my army under your protection.' (April 1, 1656 in the cathedral of Lvov.)

King Jan III Sobieski visited the shrine and placed his army under her protection, turning back the Turks at Vienna in 1683.

The Madonna is honoured as the Queen of Poland and crowned because of the many miracles worked through her intercession.

⁴ cited in Harry Klein, *Czenstochov: Our Legacy* (Montreal, 1993), p.22

It is worth mentioning that during the early 1980s, Walesa didn't drape himself in the Polish flag when he was leading the outlawed Solidarity movement. Instead, he wore a Black Madonna lapel pin on his jacket. Poles knew it to be a subversive message. Walesa's Nobel Peace Prize rests in the monastery's museum, just outside the chapel of the Black Madonna.

It has been important to mention some of the icon's history and legend, for the icon is part of the memory of the city of Czestochowa. Indeed, the icon is of paramount importance in my creative work, for the Black Madonna is one of the voices. She is the conscience of the city and its people, she brings them to account for their complicity and their silence during the events of the Holocaust played out in Czestochowa.

I first visited Czestochowa, on my travels through Poland, in 1999.

I stayed in a little hotel, near the railway station.

I had come for a break, before heading off to Israel.

Unlike every other place I had visited in Poland, I had not come to Czestochowa to research the Holocaust, or to visit sites of destruction, but to see the famous icon, the Black Madonna.

During the previous year or so, she had become part of my life: the reasons why form part of another story. Let me just say that she had become part of my consciousness; which was strange, because this icon was entrenched in the Catholic tradition of Christianity, not in the Protestant tradition.

In any case, as I was going to be in Poland, I would aim to visit Czestochowa, to see the icon for myself.

Little did I realise what this journey would mean.

I came to observe others making pilgrimage: to see what was so fabulous/miraculous.

I saw crowds and crowds of people, squeezing into the small chapel which stands on the top of the hill, at the end of the promenade, to see, and to pray to this icon.

During my time there, I tried to find out what had happened during the Holocaust in Czestochowa. I'd seen the icon, I was in Poland, so time to get back to work on Holocaust research! I was told by the local Poles, in no uncertain terms, that we 'know nothing' (this was at the museum).

But every night, as I looked out of my hotel window, on to the narrow alleys and lane ways, near the Cathedral, at the poorer end of town, I felt there was something I was not being told.

I felt a sadness, a presence.

On my last day in Czestochowa, I made a final visit to the icon. On the wall of the chapel, near the icon, are votive offerings: the wall is covered with canes, crutches, medallions, pendants, rosaries, wedding rings, crosses-all left by pilgrims who felt the Black Madonna had changed their lives, who believed their prayers had been answered. Amongst these offerings, I saw a Star of David.

I came home, with more questions than answers, determined to find out more.

Part Two: digging beneath the site, to disclose/uncover its foundation

Several years later I returned, with tools.

Important when trying to 'rebuild a vanished universe' and when one has to dig beneath the surface, to uncover that which had been covered up.

To disturb the silence.

This time my tools were notes from various books, including Harry Klein's *Czenstochov: Our Legacy*, and maps: a pre-war map, and a modern map of the city

Fragments of stories rose from the streets, whispered to me as I hid behind the camera lens, pestered to be included in the characters I formed from the ink as I wrote, asked, no, *demanding*, not to be forgotten.

All against the back drop of silence: the silence of conspiracy, the silence of shame.

Outline of the key dates and events of the Holocaust in Czestochowa:

September 1, 1939: The Polish army and police left the city-panic spread.

September 3-4: Germans enter, 150 killed. On the 4th 'Bloody Monday', 300 killed.

December 24/25, 1939: pogrom, burning of the synagogue

January 1940: women violated in the New Market Place and others driven to a school on Narutowicz Street. There, they were ordered to undress completely.

August 23rd, 1940: 1,000 young men shipped off to Ciechanow forced-labor camps; few survived.

April 9, 1941: ghetto established

December 24, 1941: confiscation of fur coats

September 23-October 5, 1942 (Yom Kippur): large Aktion, 12 days, 5 deportations. 39,000 sent to Treblinka. Hundreds killed, at Kawia St 2,000 shot.

January 3, 1943: revolt in the small ghetto: in retaliation, 250 shot.

November; remaining 5-6,000 confined in the small ghetto.

March (Purim) 20, 1943: execution of 127 Jewish intellectuals in the Jewish cemetery -'prisoner exchange to Palestine'

June 6th: destruction of the small ghetto

June 16th another 'selection': 800 killed in 2 days at the Jewish cemetery

June 25/26: liquidation of the small ghetto; 4,000 taken to the Hasag Camp

28th June: 'amnesty'

Tuesday June 29th: mass grave of 200 women, children and elderly, killed at the Jewish cemetery

July 20, 1943: from Hasag 1 camp, 500 Jews killed in the Jewish cemetery; houses in small ghetto blown up with dynamite, 'selection' at work places, 70 people murdered, including Jewish police and their families

July 27: last Aktion

16th January, 1945: Soviet Troops liberate Czestochowa (day before: 6,000 evacuated to Buchenwald etc). Approximately 5,000 Jews living in the area.

In June 1946, 2,167 Jews still living in Czestochowa.

Part Three: Rebuilding 'a vanished universe' (Wiesel)

'How events are remembered depends in turn on the texts now giving them form.'⁵

⁵ James E Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988), p.1

How to tell.

To write is to respond: it is, in the words of David Patterson ‘to respond to one who summons from the other side of a mountain of ashes, one who asks, “What have you made of me?”’

“What have you made of me?”

In the Prologue, set in August, 1939, some of my characters are introduced at a Shabbat meal. Hannah and Jacob Yelen live in a tenement building at No 9 Warszawa St (an important address to remember, because of the events of March 20, 1943). Moshe, Sarah and Samuel Glikman are guests. The Fiksel’s (Felicia and Emanuel and their family) are close neighbours: Felicia is recovering from her latest delivery. (During the shabbat meal, with the singing of *Rejoice rejoice Daughter of Zion* the voice of the icon cries out:

No! No!

Cease the singing, the joy!

For amber is not the colour of my people, it is red.

Blood red.

The colour of my son’s blood,

crimson, crime-son,

the bloody stained slopes of Masada,

the colour of the cross embroidered on the flags of the warring Crusaders,

the colour of the carpet, her people, laid out in the aftermath of their campaign;

the colour of the flesh-devouring flames of the Inquisition,

of the passion, the outrage and anger acted out during Easter tide

-the dye of pogroms

-the markings of the charge of deicide,

and now...and now...

Not the comfort and distance of tree sap,

or even the tragic beauty of a trapped insect enclosed within its golden tomb

but

the sap, the blood of her people

the fluid resin resonates

dripping, dripping, dripping

then

flowing, flowing on as a mighty river

into an ocean of the same hue.

The sound of singing, the chanting associated with *Swieto Wniebowzienia*, ‘The Feast of the Assumption’ could be heard, the prayers and praises of pilgrims making their way to the Chapel.

“Ah, one of my special days, when the faithful show their respect for me and remember when I was taken up to heaven. It’s a shame they are thick and do not make the link between me and my people!”

Thousands arrive at Jasna Gora, the monastery where the icon is housed. Many have made the pilgrimage by foot from Warsaw, a journey of nine days. Weary, with blistered, bleeding feet, the joy of the day has an anaesthetising effect, dulling their pain.

As they snake their way up the Al. Najswietszej Marii Panny, the long, spacious boulevard which runs into Staszica Park at the foot of the monastery, hymns of praise soar above the city. Many women wearing wedding dresses, in imitation of the purity of the Virgin Mary, step, as though up an aisle, carrying bouquets of flowers and herbs—sage, thyme and dill...on white, lacy cushions embroidered with red hearts. The herbs are carried gently, carefully, in readiness for their blessing. Crowns grace the heads of some, to remind them that Mary is the Queen of Heaven and all the saints. Others are decked out in traditional dress, their brightly coloured costumes adding dabs of red, blue and green amongst the ribbons of white formed by the wedding garments. Banners of the Black Madonna are everywhere; plastered on shopfronts, on the Museum door, even on the walls of the train station, and are held high in the procession by the men and children.

“Herbs...bunches of herbs brought before me to be blessed! Superstitious peasants! Back to the times when the blessing was meant to endow the plants with special powers. Special powers indeed! Tucking them under the roofs of houses was meant to protect the building from lightning strikes. Herbs! This is a place of worship, not a market place! Listen to them, some even call this day Matki Boskiej Zielnej: ‘The day of the Blessed Mother of the Herbs.’ The only herbs I have time for are maror: the bitter herbs which speak of the bitterness of my people when they were slaves in Egypt, the mouth-screwing taste of the horseradish!...and the other herb at the Seder table, the green herb, the parsley, the herb of hope for when we Jews left for the promised land. Well, they left from here, from this very place, but whether heaven was the promised land they were looking for...” Her dark eyes fill with tears. “At least that herb is usually dipped into a bowl of salt tears—the tears shed when we were in captivity...tears shed by Jews, not by those in the places they had left...or if they did cry, those tears would have been the triumphant cry of joy! Herbs...our life, death and freedom—not some superstitious nonsense!

Did placing thyme beneath the roof tops stop the Nazi lightning from striking three weeks later? Did the Poles gain extra time?

Did the sage leaves, in close proximity to the householders, make any of them wiser? Did it protect them during the Occupation?

Perhaps the herbs should have been watered by their tears, kept upright on stakes, strung up, held fast by their fears.”

Thud, thud, thud. The pilgrims march to the Chapel.

Thud, thud, thud. They keep coming, marching, on and on

Thud, thud, thud.

Eve of September, 1939:

Later that night, when the children were in bed and Felicia was nursing baby Miriam, Emanuel sat in his chair, the one with the plump crimson cushion, alone with his

thoughts. Peace. Quiet. His eyes rested on the photographs on the wall, the lamp light caused their frames to shimmer. Surrounded by family, flesh and blood in these rooms, light and dark on the walls. Can past generations protect us? Do they bear messages for those who are still in this world...or are they forever silent, destined to remain pictures, their only purpose being to cover cracks in walls?

“Papa! Papa!” Tziporah rushed into his lap.

“What’s wrong, my love?” At the sound of voices, Felicia had hurried in, Miriam in her arms, but with a nod from Emanuel, she went back to finish the feed.

“Oh, Papa, I had a bad dream. I don’t remember all of it, but I know I was very scared.”

He felt her trembling, shaking body, and held her tightly.

“My little bird, my little bird,” he cooed, stroking her head, “I’m here, Mama’s in the next room, all is well.”

“Oh, Papa, I know, but I’m scared! I hear people saying things, during the day, and I don’t understand, but they talk of war and soldiers!” She burst into tears.

Emanuel held her tight, rocking her back and forth, as he did when she was a babe.

G-d in heaven, I do not ask for much, but help me here! So I don’t have to tell too many lies!

Emanuel held his sobbing child, concentrating on calming her, when he noticed the mending basket, poking out from behind the nearest table leg. A dark green sock was wedged between the body of the basket and its lid.

“Tziporah, you’ll have to get down for a moment. I have an idea.”

Emanuel grabbed the sock, and placed the basket on the table. He found a needle, thread, several buttons and some scrap material at the bottom of the basket.

“What are you doing Papa?” asked Tziporah, her tears had ceased due to all the excitement. Instead she watched, wide-eyed, as Emanuel got to work.

“Close your eyes, this is a surprise!” Tziporah covered her eyes, wriggling with impatience.

Emanuel threaded needle, snipped cotton, and before too long, it was finished.

“Da-dah! You may open your eyes!”

“Papa, it’s a...dragon! It’s beautiful!”

“But of course! I made it! But I hope it is more than just beautiful!”

The green sock had been fashioned into a puppet: a red tongue rolled out from its heel, two gold buttons stared ahead, and a length of lace adorned its back as a ridge of scales. Emanuel's banter with Sol about alligators and dragons had given him the idea.

"It is meant to be frightening, not beautiful! Grr!" roared Emanuel, as the dragon hovered above Tziporah, bringing squeals of laughter from father and daughter.

Felicia watched from the doorway, marvelling at Emanuel's inventiveness.

"Tziporah" said Emanuel, drawing her into his lap, "this dragon belongs to the family of dragons that have been in Krakow for centuries. Remember the story of the dragon at the bottom of Wawel Hill? Krak destroyed the dragon, and built Krakow upon the hill, above the dragon's cave. One day I will take you to see the wonderful city of Krakow. There we'll visit the bronze statue of the dragon, standing where his cave used to be. He still scares people because every now and then bright red flames shoot out of his mouth."

Tziporah shivered. Emanuel gave her a hug.

"When can we go?"

Emanuel sighed. He noticed Felicia in the doorway. A look of sadness passed between them.

"One day, my precious, one day. But, until then, you have this dragon to protect you. Whenever you are scared, put on your dragon to ward off danger. Dragons eat soldiers...its their favourite dish in the whole wide world...they can never get enough!"

(the sock puppet is based, in part, on a recollection from the film, *A Call to Remember*, a 1997 film produced by John Stuckmeyer, where a sock puppet is made. In my creative work, the sock puppet is unable to protect Tziporah and her family. The puppet is found on a pile of clothes to be sorted at Treblinka. However, Miriam, the baby, survives because Sol had been able to smuggle her out of the ghetto and into the convent of the Oblate Sisters, where she is hidden, while the rest of the family is transported to Treblinka. In essence, Sol is able to fulfil part of his promise to Emanuel, that he would look after his family).

September 3-4, 1939: (Germans enter the city on the 3rd: 150 killed. The 4th became known as 'Bloody Monday: 300 killed).

The day was punctuated by round-ups, vandalism and violence. No area of the Jewish quarter was immune. For some, their fate was being forced from their apartments, hand above their heads. Once they reached the street, they were shoved into waiting trucks, or beaten, or shot, in full view. Shop keepers had been ordered by the Germans to open for business as usual. This meant their customers were unwelcome soldiers who barged into the shops, smashing and overturning their produce and merchandise. Broken glass and splintered wood littered the streets. By-passers were also rounded up, marched along the streets, to a yet unknown fate. Men particularly, were targeted. German soldiers yelled from the streets, in tenement buildings and shops, for all men over the age of fifteen to come with them. If they hesitated, a rifle butt would be used to hasten their progress.

By midday, a pattern to this terror was emerging. Several places were earmarked as assembly points where the trucks dumped their loads. Open squares and churches soon swarmed with hundreds of frightened people who were ordered to lie, face down, on the ground.

Emanuel had decided not to go to work, when he witnessed the chaos issuing on the streets. Instead, he negotiated his route to the Stary Rynek, the market, hiding in doorways and in alleys, to check on Sol. Emanuel's caution paid off; he had managed to dodge two round ups, yet the sight left him trembling. At last, heart thumping, palms wet, Emanuel reached the market. Instead of the usual bustle of people, the shouts of the vendors, the smells of food, the area was deserted. There were few vendors; they seemed to be there as a means of holding on to something familiar, grasping at the daily routine. Several stalls had been smashed, vegetables wedged between the cobblestones, pumpkin innards staining the path. Emanuel noted Sol's absence. With heavy heart, and cautious eyes, he made his way to Sol's apartment. The street was empty. Emanuel climbed the stairs on top toe, listening keenly for outside noise.

"Sol," he whispered his hand turning the knob. "It's me...Emanuel."

"Come in, quickly," hushed Sol.

They hugged each other, glad that the other was alive.

"What are you doing here, Emanuel? You know it isn't safe!"

"I know, but I wanted to check on you. I went to the market, but you were not there. I was worried that you might have been carted off."

"No, well, not yet anyway. This street has not been touched. I didn't want to risk the market place. How is the family?"

"So far, so good. G-d willing, this will be over soon."

"Are you mad? You are a bigger *meshuggah* than I thought! This is just the beginning! I think...Hold on, can you hear..."

Sol saw the answer in Emanuel's face. The noise of trucks entering the street shook the window pane. They held their breath, until the trucks stopped outside Sol's apartment building. Sol grasped Emanuel's hand.

"We will go together, *chaver*⁶, a burden shared is a trouble lightened."

"I think you're going to have to find some new proverbs, Sol, some that are more relevant." whispered Emanuel. He smiled through his fear, knowing that Sol was doing his best.

⁶ *chaver*: Yiddish for 'friend, comrade, pal.'

The landing door was pushed open, they heard boots pounding on stairs, the shouts of the soldiers calling for men to come out. Emanuel and Sol stood together, waiting for the door to fly open, ready to meet their foes. The door was kicked open, two soldiers urged them down the stairs. When they reached the entrance, they saw some neighbours, with their hands above their heads.

“Quick, in the trucks, all of you! *Schnell, schnell!*”

Emanuel and Sol climbed into the trucks, thankful that they had not been hit. Whatever the future, at least they were not alone. Emanuel thought longingly of Felicia and the children. He didn't regret going to see Sol; a similar situation may have arisen if he had gone to work instead. Looking around the truck, he saw several men with cuts and bruises on their faces, one with a large bloody gash across his skull.

Ah, there is always someone worse off, he mused. And what a time to philosophise on the nature of man!

The truck hurtled down Katedralna Street. Being near the tail gate, Sol could see the destruction happening on the streets. They passed several columns of people running, herded by soldiers. The sound of crying, pleas, lament reached their ears rather than bird song. Sol averted his eyes when he saw the bodies of those who had been killed. The smell of smoke made him glance up. He was shocked by the sight of buildings on fire, and, by the sound of it, with inhabitants still inside. *What are mere mortals, that you concern yourself with them, ...You made him but little lower than the angels,⁷ ...Ah, G-d, what is happening?*

Finally the truck came to a stop at Cathedral Square.

“Out, raus, out! *Schnell, schnell!* Quick, lie face down, now!!”

Cathedral Square. Usually a place of quiet, of peace. The Cathedral of the Holy Family bordered Katedralna and Karakowska Streets, fairways of the Jewish quarter. It was also near the railway station. On Sunday mornings parishioners sang, often accompanied by the whistle of trains. The building was imposing; red brick with two soaring towers, it was one of the largest churches in Poland.

Today the square was crowded; from a distance, a bystander could mistake it as a form of outdoor worship, people stretched out, bowed down, in prayer. A mistake, for although the majority were silently praying, it was a place of persecution, not praise. Rifles were being fired into the air, the sound of muffled weeping, the trembling of bodies could be perceived under the watchful eye of the sun. Fear did not bring much warmth.

“*Schnell, schnell!* Lie down, now!”

Emanuel started to bend, then noticed an old man's hands in his path.

⁷ Psalm 8

“Sorry, Sir” he murmured, stepping over him to find another gap when the impatient bullet struck him down, finding a resting place (Space)? for him, on the Cathedral steps.

“*Sh’ma, Yisra’el! Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai...*”⁸

(based on an entry from the *In Memorium* pages in Klein’s book *Czenstochov: Our Legacy*. ‘In Memory of my beloved parents Emanuel and Raizil Rotensztain. My father was shot near the cathedral of Czenstochova on “Bloody Monday” of 1939.’

I usually alter names, but in this case, I kept ‘Emanuel’ for the symbolism of the name (‘God with us.’)

I found this section difficult to write, because, in a sense, he was being murdered for a second time. I avoided the computer for several weeks.

Christmas Eve, 1939:

Sarah stood up and placed the laundry pan on the heat.

“It’s going to be a busy day here, Sammie. Our gentile neighbours are too busy preparing for Christmas to spend time washing their laundry. Could you go and fill one of these buckets for me? I could do with an early start.”

Samuel snatched his coat, pulled on a cap, grabbed the bucket and jumped down the stairs, two at a time, until he reached the entrance. Although it was still snowing, he felt quite warm from the exercise. He reached the well, pulled off the icy wood covering, then filled the bucket. As he reached the stairs, he felt he was being watched.

“Hey, Gliksman, come here.”

The caretaker motioned to him. He was standing in the doorway of his apartment, beside the stairwell. Samuel was caught. He placed the bucket next to the stairs, and stepped into the doorway. The caretaker grabbed his arm. His red, coarse face loomed towards Samuel, through the fog of alcoholic vapours.

“You think you’re someone, don’t you, you cheeky pig!”

The caretaker belched, then grinned.

“Hungry? I have something ready.”

Samuel pulled to get away but couldn’t, his arm held in a vice-like grip.

“See, Jew-boy what I am having for breakfast. Bread, with ham. Want some?”

With his spare arm, he thrust the sandwich near Samuel’s face.

⁸ Dt 6:4 (*The Sh’ma*): ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is...[one].’

“What? I can’t hear you, Jew. Do you want some pig? Pig for a pig?” He burst into laughter, his thick belly wobbling.

Samuel was trapped. He was sweating, scared.

“Hey! It’s not nice not to reply when you are asked a question? Do you want some?”

“No...thank you. I’m not hungry.”

“Not hungry?” roared the caretaker. “This is fine quality meat...the only chance you Jew will ever get any! Here...”

He grabbed the sandwich and wiped it over Samuel’s face, back and forth. Samuel struggled, trying to free himself from the man’s grip, moving his face away from the offending ham. He felt dirty, bile filling his mouth at the smell of the fat.

Finally the caretaker tired of his game, and pushed Samuel outside.

“Go, Jew boy. Let that be a lesson.” As he turned to go back into his apartment, the caretaker turned around to stare at the quivering boy.

“And that’s only part of what will be happening to you- and to all the Jewish pigs! Time to get rid of all pigs.”

Samuel rushed up the stairs, bucket forgotten, ducking to hide beneath the stairs on the landing.

Beneath the peeling paint, thickly plastered with cob webs Samuel slumped down. He curled into a ball and hugged his legs. Gulping for breath, he continued to see the caretaker’s angry face in his mind. As he lay there, recovering, he felt chilled. Looking down, he realised that he had lost control. Tears of shame dribbled down, mingling with the damp of sweat and urine.

(Based on an account by Szlomo Szwimer:

‘My parents, though not extremely religious, kept a strictly kosher home. Often in my childhood, situations in the outside world would demonstrate to me the total disregard and disrespect of Jewish culture and tradition, held by the non-Jews of Czenstochover. One particularly disturbing recollection is of a man who watched over the building in which my family lived. One day, I saw this man, sitting outside, eating a ham sandwich. The man called me over and asked me if I was familiar with the type of meat that he was eating. When I said that I was not, he held down my arms and rubbed a slice of ham all over my face and mouth. It is a taste I have never been able to rid myself of to this very day.’⁹⁾

Later that day (24th December): a pogrom and the burning of the new synagogue. The torah scrolls and the impressive library of the Judaic Institute of the synagogue are destroyed.

⁹ Szwimer, ‘A Lost Childhood’ in Klein, op.cit; p.116

In the account by the Black Madonna, she mentions *Wigili*, Christmas Eve. *Wigili* means 'to watch'. It is the most important day of the Christmas season.

(the icon):

Wigili: 'to watch.' Watch what? Watch for the birth of the Christ child, or watch as Jewish homes, shops and synagogues are destroyed?

Or watch my tears as they stain the wood of this icon? If people noticed these, they would herald the outer manifestation of my sadness as miraculous.

Miraculous! What would they know about miraculous! It would be miraculous if I pulled away from the wall and stormed out of this chapel!

Watch, time, time ticking...midnight. There is a legend that at midnight on Christmas Eve animals can be understood by humans. Was there a cat, maybe even a dog, near the synagogue tonight? Wonder what they think of humans.

The synagogue, the synagogue...the Torah scrolls are burning, holy words ascending to heaven in flame. The once white parchment now bent black, crackling, their fiery fingertips encircle the melting silver crowns, which grace the top of the wooden rollers. And the prayer books, held and prayed over for generations, lie discarded, abandoned. Yet they are open, their pages might be crumpled and torn...yet they are open.

Listen...listen...block out the carol singing, with its promises of 'Peace on earth'...listen to the prayers, which survive both flame and destruction.

Listen, listen. Can you hear the words of Balaam? Instead of curses, blessings: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your tabernacles, O Israel."¹⁰

Listen...

January, 1940 (violation of the women)

"Don't be scared, don't be scared," thought Felicia, as she was pushed along the darkened streets with other women from the area. She shivered. [A raid] Abruptly woken, by shouts and kicking at her door, she'd only had time to grab her woollen shawl from the arm-chair near the door.

Felicia pulled it around her thin shoulders, the January night clear, crystal clear, sharp, piercing cold.

"Move, move, hurry up!" Threats and truncheons hammered the women, a sagging line of bowed heads, unbrushed hair, most still wearing night attire.

The moon's lantern licked the doorways, lit tenements shuttered from the sight of the shuffling, twisting twine.

¹⁰ The opening sentence of every synagogue service, based on the words of Balaam (Numbers 24:5) Balaam, a seer, had been summoned by Balak, King of Moab, to curse the Israelites. When Balaam saw the Israelites, he could not curse them; instead, he blessed them. (see Numbers 22-24)

Along Warszawska St to Daszynskiego Square.

Felicia prayed that the children would be all right-she couldn't do more than she had to prepare them. Perhaps Sol had...

"Ahh!"

Sarah Gliksman's right shoe caught between the uneven cobblestones; she was frantically clutching at the air to break her fall. Felicia, without slacking her pace, lifted Sarah beneath her right armpit and kept her in motion, marching in the column.

"Thank you," murmured Sarah, her face perspiring.

Felicia squeezed Sarah's hand. The warmth of friendship pushed back the iciness a fraction, allowing fear to put its feet up for a quick breather.

The women continued, withdrawn, silent. The only sound was that of their feet...clump, clump, clump, the outbursts of the guards and the din of their inner-most thoughts.

"Halt!"

They had arrived. Tired, terrified eyes tried to make sense of their destination. If circumstances had been friendly, they would have joked about it.

A school... at their age? They had already finished their education. Nowadays they only ascended its steps if their children were in trouble!

Now...they were in trouble.

And there was no parent to protect them, to keep them safe.

They were pushed inside: guards barked, dogs growled, women screamed.

The night was silent.

Later, much later, Felicia could grab the scene, as the guards grabbed the women.

Strips of virginal night dresses fluttered through the air, like torn off gift paper, unwrapping bodies; bright lights, averted eyes, probing rifle butts, blobs of spit, pain.

Brutal.

Felicia tried to shut out the cries of the other women, their pleas, their anguish as she fought mentally to distance herself from her own violation.

The thick red face pumping above her seemed unreal if she could just focus on Emanuel Emanuel...if you had been here, would this be happening?

Prayers echoed around her.

The shame of being used, abused.

Blood-stained bodies and clothing, no longer white and pure, vomit, bile.

Vile: that an act of blessing could become a curse.

The dark was lifting when the guards left the bundles of women to creep through the now-

Staring streets, back to their own caves to lick their wounds, to clean up the muck, to fix a brave face.

Felicia hobbled home, her ankle crushed by boots and steel.
Snow was falling, its hand moving over the bloody trail, covering up the evidence.
She was cold, so cold. A chill emanating from within her heart, radiating outwards,
colder than the outside winter.

The women were as phantoms, ghosts, their stained nightgowns torn and flapping like hands, in the muffled light of dawn. On their own yet as one, clutching their dignity to them like scraps of cloth.

Finally, her home in sight, a few more slides with her leg and then the steps...the pain seared through her leg, burning to her thigh but this was nothing, thought Felicia, this can heal...

Hop...drag, hop...drag, hop... drag.
One more, one more, one more, one...

She could see her door, one more level, ten more stairs...the door handle beckoned, its well-worn knob held by loved ones: keep going, keep going, it urged.
Memories: of Emanuel, newly married, proudly opening the door to their life together; of neighbours coming in to help with babies, of the door opening each night to let Emanuel back in: from the outside world, to the love of his family.
And now Felicia grasped it, opening her sanctuary.

How does one respect the memory/integrity of both victim and survivor?

-by anchoring the writing in fact;
(Every possible reference to Czestochowa is viewed as a chance to improve/expand this account. Abraham Bomba, the barber in Lanzmann's *Shoah*, came from Czestochowa. He escaped from Treblinka. In Martin Gilbert's recent book *The Righteous*, there are several references to righteous gentiles in Czestochowa. Read Ben Helfgott's terrifying memories of Czestochowa in Gilbert's *The Holocaust*, pp:813-814)

-by drawing on testimony, both written and oral;
-by bearing witness to both victim and survivor: adding detailed notes at the close of each chapter;
-by allowing silence its role, including the role of bystander. Silence is not neutral.

Can one who was not there write accurately of the events?

'It involves taking for granted the notion that we cannot dismiss or outlaw Holocaust fiction, since it is simply a different genre from survivor testimony. It approaches the subject in its own way, rather than aiming to 'add' or 'go beyond' the survivor record. Any new literary perspectives on the Holocaust after the middle of the third millennium can only be written by descendants of survivors or by novelists with no connection to the event. Given that this is the case, it makes more sense to attempt to construct a typology

of Holocaust fiction than to consign the genre as a whole to the status of a failed supplement.’¹¹

Hirsch mentions the differences between *memory* (survivors) and *post-memory* (children of survivors)¹²

What about the next category? Could we define it as *Witness-to-Memory*?

Lev 5:1: ‘When any of you sin in that you have heard a public adjuration to testify and though able to testify as one who has *seen or learned* of the matter-does not speak up, you are subject to punishment.’

With much fear and trepidation: I see this as sacred work; recording the events of the Holocaust, through the lives of the characters of this city. There have been times when I have set this work aside; when I have felt it to be too difficult, or that it is not for me to record...but then I am drawn back. If I turn my back on this work, then perhaps I will be seen as a bystander. I have been given the opportunity, through my initial interest in an icon, to probe beneath the surface of this city. I keep researching, piecing together as much as possible, for this is no ordinary creative body of work; it is witness.

Part Four: The bricks: old and new (Characters/voices):

‘...it is when Holocaust history is personalized and dramatized, when abstractions and numbers give way to human drama, that the distance between us and the victims closes.’¹³

Let me draw this paper to a close by ‘fleshing out’ some of the voices in the work, to show the connections between facts and the imagined:

1. Black Madonna: already spoken about the icon. I’d like to add that her contribution demonstrates her Jewishness-no compromise on this point!

2. Machel Birenzweig (now Pan and Pani Krysiwicz, two righteous gentiles)

Machel and his brother were instructed by the Germans to remove furniture from the Jewish homes after the liquidation of the large ghetto. Machel hid children whose parents had been deported in boxes and cupboards at the Meble-Lager. He was betrayed by a Pole, and his wife and elderly mother were killed. His brother escaped and hid with the partisans.

3. Samuel Kohn (now Mordechai Kopinska)

4. Lucia Bergman (now Ruth Rosenblum)

5. David Gelber (now Joseph Kaufman)

¹¹ Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (Routledge: London, 2000), p.8

¹² M Hirsch, cited in and discussed by Ruth Wajnryb in *The Silence* (Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, 2001), p.150

¹³ Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust* (Palgrave:Houndmills, 1999), p.33

Part of a very religious family. Came to the United States in 1947. Became a furniture maker and designer of picture frames. Some have been sold to famous museums, eg. The Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts.

In my work, he is one of the children saved by Pan and Pani Krysiwicz. In my work Pan Krysiwicz is a furniture maker, a wood carver. He and his wife, who have no children, have befriended Joseph. Pan Krysiwicz has taught and encouraged his wood carving skills. In my book Joseph returns to Czestochowa after some time in the United States. He is the one who inserts the Star of David in the wall of the chapel of the Black Madonna, in memory of the righteous gentiles who saved him.

6. 'Maria'=Miriam.

Based on a story of a toddler, placed in a basket and escorted by a local Pole to a convent outside the ghetto. The bell is rung, the nun takes the basket inside.

My version (which is based on an event which happened at different times in different places), is of little Miriam, the daughter of the Fiksel's, being smuggled out at the time of the large Aktion in September-October 1942.

7. Moishe Kremiski (A Bomba and others: Treblinka)

8. Lucy Nisker (Pearl Yelen)

9. Szlomo Szwimer (now Samuel Gliksman) -(Moshe and Sarah Gliksman)

10. Emanuel Rotensztein (now Emanuel Fiksel) -(Felicia, Tziporah and Sol)

Part Five: Rebuilding/Reconstruction

This is what I am hoping to achieve in my written work. It is not an historical record, but it is history. Lawrence Langer refers to the relationship between facts and imagination as that of 'symbiotic kinship',¹⁴

'If there is a line between fact and fiction, it may by necessity be a winding border that tends to bind these two categories as much as it separates them allowing each side to dissolve occasionally into the other.'¹⁵

May my work inform/educate others about the events that happened in Czestochowa during the Holocaust.

po lin is Hebrew for Poland: *לִי-יָנוּחַ*. Its literal translation is: 'here you lie' or 'here you will rest'. It can also mean 'to lodge' 'to abide' 'to remain' 'to turn in' 'to pass the night', 'to continue'.

Full of nuances, deeply symbolic in meaning ('to pass the night'-the Kingdom of Night, 'to turn in'-to inform, 'to continue'-to survive).

¹⁴ Langer, op.cit

¹⁵ Young, op.cit; p.52

In reference to Czestochowa, to the destruction of the Jewish community during the Holocaust, *po lin* does not mean ‘here you lie *and you are forgotten*’!

“What have you made of me?”

I hope that I have helped to rebuild a fraction of one tiny part of a vanished universe,

and

I hope I have allowed some voices to be heard, amongst the rubble.

‘Jews perished in extermination camps, execution sites, ghettos, slave labour camps, and on the death marches. The testimony of those who survived constitutes the main record of what was done to the Jews during those years. The murderers also kept records, often copious ones. But the victims, the six million who were done to death, could leave no record. A few fragments of diaries, letters and scribbled messages do survive. But in the main, others must bear witness to what was done to the millions who could never tell their own story.’¹⁶

¹⁶ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust* (Fontana/Collins: Glasgow, 1986), p.18