

# Topos of the Jewish treasure in postwar Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian shtetls

Magdalena Waligórska

To cite this article: Magdalena Waligórska (04 Nov 2024): Topos of the Jewish treasure in postwar Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian shtetls, *Holocaust Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/17504902.2024.2392325](https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2024.2392325)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2024.2392325>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Nov 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 5



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Topos of the Jewish treasure in postwar Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian shtetls

Magdalena Waligórska 

Department of European Ethnology, Humboldt University Berlin, Berlin, Germany

## ABSTRACT



While the fascination with ‘Jewish gold’ and the belief that Jews possess riches long predates the Holocaust, it was the systematic dispossession of Jews during World War II that fueled the myth of ‘Jewish treasures’ to an unprecedented extent. Based on ethnographic field research in six former shtetls: Lüje and Mir in Belarus, Biłgoraj and Izbica in Poland and Brody and Berezne in Ukraine, and diverse sources, including testimonies of survivors, archival documents, memoirs, and literary texts, this paper discusses the longevity of the myth of Jewish treasures in the post-Holocaust East-Central European provinces and analyses its social consequences.

## KEYWORDS

Genocidal expropriation policies; Holocaust; plunder; treasures; ‘Jewish gold’; myth

In 1963, one of the most acclaimed Polish authors of children’s literature, Adam Bahdaj, wrote *The Black Umbrella*, a detective novel that became hugely popular and got translated into several languages. The story, set in postwar Warsaw, is a treasure hunt. A group of children, equipped with an old map, is searching for a trove of gold coins buried in a bathroom of an old house. We learn it was hidden during the Nazi occupation by ‘a very rich wine dealer,’ who, before he got evicted from his villa by the Germans, hid all his gold in the wall, and, expecting he was going to die, created a map with the location of the treasure for the only member of his family he believed was still alive – his sister who had emigrated to the United States. A mysterious Ms Bauman, an English teacher, becomes the depositary of the map, hidden inside an old umbrella.<sup>1</sup>

There is no mention of Jews in the novel. The topoi of the sudden death of the treasure owner from the hands of the Nazi occupiers, hidden gold, heirs in the United States, and the ethnic otherness of the rich wine dealer – Bahdaj makes him an Armenian – suggest, however, that what the author is describing (penning his novel just eighteen years after the war) was in fact a hunt for Jewish gold. The fact that a camouflaged story of a Jewish treasure in Warsaw makes its way to children’s literature, suggests both the longevity of the myth of Jewish treasures; and its popularity in postwar Poland, where the search for Jewish gold continued for many decades after the Holocaust, both in private houses and

**CONTACT** Magdalena Waligórska  waligoma@hu-berlin.de  Institute of European Ethnology, Humboldt University Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10117 Berlin, Germany

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

at Jewish cemeteries, inside the mass graves, and even in the human ashes gathered at the former death camps.<sup>2</sup>

The fascination with Jewish treasures has continued in postwar Polish popular culture, inspiring films,<sup>3</sup> crime novels,<sup>4</sup> and the scene of hobby treasure hunters.<sup>5</sup> The association of Jews and money likewise lives on in today's popular images of Jews holding gold coins – paintings or sculptures, sold as good luck charms, which have become omnipresent in Polish homes and shops.<sup>6</sup> Anthropological studies carried out in postwar Poland and Belarus also point to the longevity of the myths involving Jews and wealth or those which frame the Jew as a magical figure that can bring peasants prosperity or secure fertility and good crops.<sup>7</sup> 'The only association with Jews that we ever had were treasures,' states a protagonist of Patrycja Dołowy's recent reportage, who was growing up in the 1960s in a small town in southern Poland.<sup>8</sup> In the near total absence of actual Jews, the myths of hidden Jewish riches, or Jews as 'facilitators of wealth' remain among the most dominant, persistent, and widespread topoi in the Polish collective imagination and popular culture.

Why is this topos so widespread? And is the phenomenon limited to Poland only? While the takeover of Jewish property and the postwar search for gold in former death camps, and body disposal pits have attracted some attention of scholars, predominantly in Poland but also, to a lesser degree, in Belarus and Ukraine, much less is known about the way the topos of Jewish treasures manifests itself in places which used to have a significant Jewish population before the Second World War – in the former shtetels of East-Central Europe.<sup>9</sup> This article addresses this gap in existing research, focusing on the practices that the myth has inspired in the postwar period and, more generally on the effect has it exerted on the postwar local communities.

This article looks at six former shtetels in the Polish-Ukrainian-Belarusian borderlands: Izbica and Biłgoraj in eastern Poland; Iūje and Mir in western Belarus; and Berezne and Brody in western Ukraine to study the longevity of the myth of Jewish treasures in the post-Holocaust East-Central European provinces. The high ratio of the Jewish population, as well as the towns' geographical location in diverse historical regions and their changing geo-political allegiances, make them particularly pertinent objects of study. First, the potential post-Holocaust practices of treasure hunt are likely to be more pronounced here because of the greater amount of Jewish property in these towns. And, secondly, their differing ethnic setup, historical allegiances prior to World War I, and scenarios of occupation during the Second World War grant any similar patterns that emerge in all six locations a degree of representativity.<sup>10</sup>

Based on testimonies of the survivors, memoirs, as well as archival materials, *yizkor bikher* and oral history interviews with Jewish survivors, their descendants, and local inhabitants of the towns, the article offers a comparative perspective on the local practices of, and narratives about, treasure hunting in the spaces vacated by Jews murdered in the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> I will examine both the social rules that accompany such activities, especially the aspects of taboo that surrounded the desecration of sacred spaces (e.g. burial grounds), and the consequences that such mass-scale engagement in the appropriation of Jewish wealth (by means of plunder) had on the local communities affected.

Throughout this article, I concentrate on the narrative trope of a 'treasure hunt' and 'Jewish treasure' in relation to postwar practices of plunder of valuables that were either purposefully hidden by their Jewish owners, or got buried together with the bodies of

Holocaust victims in mass graves. The phenomenon that these local narratives refer to includes a set of very different practices, ranging from serendipitous discoveries of hidden valuables during renovation work, to targeted searches with metal detectors of plots of land or houses that used to belong to Jews, and mass-scale desecrations of burial sites, including extraction of body parts. By analyzing the way these (sometimes criminal) forms of expropriation become narrated as an adventurous ‘treasure hunt,’ I do not mean to trivialize the nature of these activities, but rather point to a narrative structure that allows the respondents to neutralize the ethical weight of such practices.

The term ‘treasure’ is also not the most usual expression that the respondents themselves have used. In the verbal accounts of these activities, recorded during our field research with local inhabitants of the six shtetls, the noun ‘gold’ (Pol: *złoto*, Rus/Ukr: *zoloto*, Bel: *zolata*) was more than two times more frequent than ‘treasure’ (Pol/Bel: *skarab*, Rus: *klad*, Ukr: *tsinnosti*).<sup>12</sup> The figure of ‘gold’ or ‘Jewish gold’ also serves as a typical description of finds that the respondents did not see themselves, but possessed only second-hand, or anecdotal knowledge of. Whenever our interviewees reported events that they themselves participated in, or had more detailed knowledge of, concrete objects of value would be mentioned: e.g. ‘table silverware,’<sup>13</sup> ‘a beautiful necklace,’<sup>14</sup> ‘Jewish liturgical objects,’<sup>15</sup> or a ‘leather drum [filled with valuables].’<sup>16</sup> Whenever the report concerned a hearsay, or gossip, the objects (allegedly) found would typically be described as ‘gold.’

In economic terms, postwar treasure hunts may be a marginal aspect of the massive dispossession of Jews that took place during, and in the aftermath of the Holocaust and included the orchestrated seizure of Jewish assets by the Nazi German occupiers, plunder of the local ghettos in the wake of mass deportation or mass shootings, the ‘voluntary’ and involuntary transfer of wealth that took place in the context of hiding, and the mass-scale takeover of Jewish property sanctioned after the war.<sup>17</sup> While these comprehensive and extremely lucrative acts of mass-dispossession were limited in time and had an end, the lingering myth of hidden ‘Jewish treasures’ remained in the collective imagination for much longer, inspiring looting practices that persisted for long decades after the war, and, in fact, never ceased.<sup>18</sup> The popular myth of the Jewish treasures is, therefore, an important indicator of the long-term effects of the wartime economy of dispossession. The figure of the Jewish treasures, inspiring the popular belief that Jews should continue (symbolically or not) to provide wealth to non-Jews, and propelling a set of practices that include illegal searches with metal detectors, damage of material Jewish heritage, and desecration of cemeteries and mass graves, is a remnant of what Alice von Bieberstein calls the ‘political economy of genocidal destruction.’<sup>19</sup> The expectation that Jewish riches can and should be further excavated and enrich their finders is directly related to the systematic economy of dispossession introduced by the Nazi German occupiers. The systemic disregard for Jewish burial sites and necroviolence inflicted on Jewish dead bodies during the Holocaust likewise facilitated the later desecrations.<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, throughout history, the anti-Jewish sentiment often went hand in hand with a more or less officially sanctioned periodical dispossession of Jews. Pogroms, which, as a rule, included mass-scale looting of Jewish shops and homes, are a classic example.<sup>21</sup> But, historically, even non-violent forms of governance across Europe often included an element of systematic financial exploitation of Jews, for example via excessive levies, Jewish poll tax, or non-consensual loans to the state.<sup>22</sup> The belief that Jews possess wealth and could be therefore separately taxed or periodically looted has a long history.

The mass-scale dispossession coupled with genocidal violence that took place during the Second World War was a game changer, though. While pogrom-related looting was limited in time and had specific select groups of beneficiaries (typically, in the first place, the military, or otherwise armed men and, then, other town dwellers actively participating in the pogrom), Holocaust-related dispossession created longer term conditions for appropriation and a mass-scale, almost universal participation across class and age divides.<sup>23</sup>

### **'Treasure hunt' in the shtetls**

Many Jewish survivors noted with bitterness that the German occupation created a period of prosperity for the local non-Jewish population. Marcelli Najder, a Holocaust survivor, who, under an assumed Polish identity, worked in postwar Izbica as a pharmacist recalls this in his diary:

How many times, it gets my blood up, when a customer comes into the pharmacy – a peasant or a town dweller – and starts moaning that under the Germans one could make good money, that the Germans let them have a good life!!!

Of course, one helped a Jew to hide for three days, then denounced him to the Gestapo and took the money – wasn't that a paradise. Or, dozens of generations of Czech Jews were working hard, and then they were brought to Izbica, where, within two months the locals got into their hands what the others had worked for two hundred years.<sup>24</sup>

The plunder of hidden Jewish valuables that continued after the Holocaust likewise involved large parts of the population. A man born in Biłgoraj in 1949, remembers that formerly Jewish houses, populated by new tenants after the war, would have all their ovens and stoves dismantled, because people were destroying them in search of Jewish treasures.<sup>25</sup> Another respondent, born in 1950, insists that 'there was a hell lot of this gold; wherever there were Jews, there was gold.'<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in Mir local inhabitants recalled that 'there was a sea of these [Jewish] treasures here,' particularly in the walls of the Mir castle, used in the war time as a ghetto.<sup>27</sup>

The topography of Jewish life and death and the resulting knowledge of where to look for Jewish treasures belonged to a shared know-how. In Iūje, a local 'treasure hunter' localized the path that German executioners led local Jews to the site of mass shooting, and multiple locals searched the area with metal detectors hoping to find Jewish valuables discarded in the last moment by the desperate victims.<sup>28</sup> In Biłgoraj, one respondent demonstrated during an interview how he would search the seams of Jewish bedding in search of hidden valuables.<sup>29</sup> Another interviewee shared that Jews hid their valuables in the ovens: 'always in the ovens, only in the ovens, they had a custom of [hiding treasures] in the ovens.'<sup>30</sup> In Mir, a local treasure hunter would enter the gardens and attics of formerly Jewish houses in search of Jewish belongings, and, when he himself purchased one such house, he carefully removed all the floors.<sup>31</sup> The conviction that formerly Jewish houses *must* by default contain hidden riches pushed some postwar tenants to dismantle the structures completely in a feverish search for treasures:

My house here was also Jewish, so I dismantled it and built one anew. I thought I would find something. We worked then, but you know what kind of jobs these were. It was a poor life, really, we did not have enough to make a living. So, we say, let's dismantle it, maybe we find

something. Nothing! And then, when they built a chimney earlier, there was a foundation on the very bottom, and I say: ‘maybe here, underneath.’ Nothing! Nothing!<sup>32</sup>

Not only private houses, but also Jewish cemeteries and war-time mass graves were sites of routine excavations. At the mass grave in Iūje such desecrations happened in the early postwar period. In Izbica and Biłgoraj, our respondents shared that local inhabitants would routinely dig for gold at the Jewish cemeteries still in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>33</sup> Even the exhumations and robbery of human remains, however, were accompanied by a certain set of shared beliefs and a know-how of how to extract gold. A group of respondents from Izbica recounted:

*Respondent 1:* People were simply digging up the graves here. Why?

*Respondent 2:* The mass graves, that is.

*Respondent 1:* The mass graves, where Jews were buried together with their fortunes. They would swallow a lot of gold and keep it inside themselves. These people had fortunes, but what are you going to take with you? There is a war ... what can you take with yourself? Just money. And they [German executioners] were not controlling them, and were killing them in masses. So, certain people who knew what riches Jews had, would go digging there ...

*Respondent 3:* Because it was the Germans who were shooting at them, but Poles who dug up the pits and buried [the corpses]. So later, after the war, they knew where [to look]. ... Where [Jews] were buried naked, they did not open these pits any more, but where they were buried with their clothes on [they did] ... There were shoes [scattered at the cemetery], with the soles and heels ripped out. They were searching everything [for gold there].<sup>34</sup>

In postwar Poland, the desecrations of Jewish cemeteries in search of gold were, in fact, so common that, in 1946, the Communist authorities had to pass a decree penalizing the practice with up to ten years of prison and classifying the crime as ‘particularly dangerous during the reconstruction of the state.’<sup>35</sup>

Topographies of ‘Jewish treasures’ were not only common knowledge in the post-war shtetls, but the search itself was a highly democratized undertaking. Sources from Poland, Ukraine and Belarus suggest that even children participated in the search for Jewish gold in the post-war period, scavenging ruins, cellars and even cemeteries. In Brody, children reportedly found gold coins in a jar;<sup>36</sup> in Biłgoraj, they penetrated cellars of formerly Jewish houses,<sup>37</sup> and in Iūje, the Commission of Minors’ Affairs had to repetitively intervene, after local children had desecrated the Jewish cemetery in search of gold.<sup>38</sup>

The dispossession of Jews in East Central Europe not only continued long after the end of the war in the form of sanctioned takeover and redistribution of Jewish private and communal property, the repurposing of the Jewish cemeteries and synagogues, and treasure hunts.<sup>39</sup> All these forms of wealth appropriation also had an intergenerational economic effect. In Iūje, local inhabitants recounted the story of a local man, who allegedly educated three of his daughters at the medical university for ‘Jewish gold.’<sup>40</sup> Similarly, one interviewee in Biłgoraj maintained that ‘several [local] fortunes had their beginning in the wartime period,’ and originated in the plunder of Jewish property in town.<sup>41</sup> Another interviewee was able to identify a family who reportedly ‘own[ed] seven or eight houses’ because of ‘bucketfulls of gold’ that they had found.<sup>42</sup> A respondent in Izbica was able to point to a concrete address in town, saying that ‘two houses

were built with this [Jewish] gold,' found on the premises by the postwar tenants.<sup>43</sup> Another interviewee went so far as to say that 'half of Izbica was built with Jewish gold' and that local people could immediately detect when people 'built a house with Jewish gold' because simple farmers could suddenly afford financing construction work.<sup>44</sup>

What this (post)war economy of dispossession generated in the former shtetls is a widespread social expectation we often observed during our field research that Jews should perpetually remain a (real or symbolic) source of income. In the immediate postwar period this translated into very concrete financial demands toward returning Jewish survivors by their Polish neighbors. In Przemyśl, Dęblin and Białoobrzegi local Poles demanded high ransom from the Jews who resettled in town, threatening them with death.<sup>45</sup> There were also multiple cases of armed robbery and murder of Jews returning from hiding or evacuation in the Soviet interior, as it was believed that they return to reclaim their riches.<sup>46</sup> Ita Frajdenberg from Biłgoraj, who survived the Holocaust in hiding, was dissuaded by other survivors from even showing up in her home town because she was 'of a rich house.'<sup>47</sup> In Józefów Biłgorajski, a young Jewish woman named Rapaport was reportedly tortured and murdered a few days after her return to town because the locals were convinced that she 'returned in order to dig something out.'<sup>48</sup> Rachel Luchfeld from Józefów Biłgorajski, who considered recovering some of the items her family had buried in the ground before going into hiding, gave up the idea out of fear. 'I saw some [valuables] when I came back, I saw plenty, but I didn't dig out nothing,' she recounts, 'I figured if I dig out, they will dig me in. So I took nothing.'<sup>49</sup> Of eighty survivors from the six shtetls whose postwar history we could trace thanks to the Shoah Foundation's oral history interviews, nearly fifty percent never returned to their prewar places of residence.<sup>50</sup> The reasons included fear of violence and robbery at the hands of the non-Jewish population.

The conjunction of Jews and money has survived in the East Central European provinces to this day. Inhabitants of former shtetls not only expected to find Jewish gold hidden in the houses they took over after the war (and were disappointed if they found nothing), but they also felt entitled to their share if someone else (including the actual owner) recovered a treasure within the household they inhabited.<sup>51</sup> Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian inhabitants of former shtetls also still expect Jewish financial help, for example in the renovation of repurposed synagogues,<sup>52</sup> the upkeep of Jewish cemeteries,<sup>53</sup> but also less obvious projects, such as local museums. In Brody, where the local, eighteenth-century fortress synagogue had been dilapidating over decades, prior to the Russian invasion, local authorities made some plans to restore it. The most popular idea for how to finance the renovation was that 'affluent Jews' should provide the funds for it.<sup>54</sup> When, in Iūje, a local activist and collector of vintage objects proposed to convert one of the former synagogues into a museum that would house his collection, he expressed an expectation that Jews should finance the museum.<sup>55</sup> In return, he was ready to dedicate one room to Jewish history.

Individuals living in formerly Jewish houses also occasionally demand that Jews make repairs to their, already dilapidated, property. Tamara Baradach, daughter of a Holocaust survivor from Iūje, who emigrated to Israel in the 1990s, often accompanied Israeli families of survivors to their ancestral homes across Belarus. Pleas for financial help



for renovation from current owners of prewar Jewish houses was a phenomenon she had come across a lot:

There was one story like that in Iūje. Houses where [Belarusian] people have been living in for decades, apartments and property that they got for free, without having to lift a finger. I bring the former owners. It is the same story over and over again. ‘Look at how we are living! Look, no one has ever made any repairs for us! Why don’t you give us some money?’ ... I am not an aggressive person, but when human rudeness or idiocy reaches this level, I get carried away ... I simply said to them then: ‘Why don’t you go to Stanevichi [site of mass executions near Iūje] and contact the owners? Maybe they will help you from underground?’<sup>56</sup>

The expectation that visiting Holocaust survivors, or their descendants, leave a gift of cash when they visit their towns of origin, existed already in the Communist era, when such tourism was relatively rare, but the Western currencies in particularly high demand. An interviewee from Biłgoraj, who reported one such visit of a Holocaust survivor in his home in the 1980s, thus recounted, with bitter disappointment, that the guest left handing out to each of his hosts ‘*only* one-dollar notes.’<sup>57</sup> Decades later, the idea that Jews of the second or third generation visiting their ancestral homes should pay for accessing these places seems to be widespread, too. In Biłgoraj, a group of Israelis visiting the town in 2010 was confronted with the demand by the current owners to pay them a fee to be able to enter the backyard of their old family home.<sup>58</sup> Some locally appointed private individuals who hold keys to Jewish cemeteries in the former shtetls in Poland (a widespread practice to prevent acts of vandalism), also, in some cases, charge visiting groups a fee for entering the cemetery.<sup>59</sup>

The *longue durée* character of this Eastern European experience of mass-scale repossession and enrichment not only solidified certain patterns of expectation, or social convention, but also enabled the sublimation of genocidal politics of expropriation into a morally neutral and non-violent practice coded as ‘treasure hunting.’ The topos of ‘Jewish treasures’ both removes the stigma of plunder and enables a trans-generational transfer of neutral narratives of expropriation. A typical account of this kind romanticizes dispossession into a picaresque vision of a ‘treasure hunt,’ which foregrounds the excitement and the awe of the discovery rather than the human suffering and tragedy that led to the creation of the ‘treasure.’ In that way, the mass-scale transfer of wealth, which contributed to the rise of the postwar middle class and, as Andrzej Leder argues, resembled a social revolution in Poland, went, if not quite unnoticed and uncomprehended, then translated into a sanitized version of itself.<sup>60</sup>

The ostensibly harmless motif of ‘Jewish treasures,’ or the good luck-bringing Jews, helps to express social desires and expectations originating from historical theft and exploitation of Jews as more palatable, by removing violence (extortion, murder, blackmail) from the picture. The acquisition of Jewish riches becomes in this way likened to receiving a windfall – a lucky coincidence that has no direct relation to the Holocaust. The following account of a respondent from Mir is paradigmatic in this respect:

Jews would divide their cellars in two halves, in one of them they hid their property, and then built a wall. The entrance to such a cellar was underneath the oven. A basement like that was found next to our pharmacy. There used to be an old house there, but it burnt down and only a cellar remained. It collapsed and children began to play there after the war. One child pushes another, the wall crumbles and furniture and gold in jars emerges in front of their eyes ... Children started shoving this gold into their pockets. But the



KGB worked well. They took everything away. Only one little boy had a hole in his pocket and the gold fell into his shoe. Thanks to that the family of the boy enriched itself a little. And this is the story that is being passed down in our village from generation to generation.<sup>61</sup>

The story is revealing not only because it shows how, in former shtetls, the extraction know-how, and the Jewish strategies of hiding valuables belonged to common knowledge and got transmitted from generation to generation, but also because it promulgates this romanticized vision of ‘Jewish treasures,’ which foregrounds the serendipity and innocence of the seekers. Treasure vaults are waiting to be found, the seekers have some merit in the process, and a full moral right to look for treasures. It almost appears as if Jewish belongings were almost voluntarily left there by their Jewish owners for their non-Jewish neighbors as natural heirs.

The metaphor of inheritance, in fact, does appear also in Jewish accounts of these post-Holocaust ‘treasure hunts,’ though it is used with biting sarcasm. Moshe Teytlboym in a memorial book of Biłgoraj, published in 1955 in Jerusalem, reports:

the spilt Jewish blood did not yet dry on the cobblestones of the market place, when ‘a couple of our nice Aryan neighbors’ began pillaging the bunkers like jackals in search of Jewish treasures. And everything was precious to them: clothes, pots, even an old straw mattress from a broken bed. The victims were in their graves. There was no family to mourn their death, so these ‘good people’ came to the bunker to take over the inheritance.<sup>62</sup>

While Jewish survivors resented the notion that local non-Jews feel morally entitled to Jewish possessions, especially given that they sometimes participated in their denunciation or even killing, non-Jewish accounts abound in stories of legitimation that suggest a voluntary transfer of wealth from Jews to non-Jews. One respondent from Mir recounted:

My grandmother lived in a farmstead ... , and Jews came to her too, to ask her to hide [their] gold. She said there was a lot of it. They said ‘if nobody comes to retrieve it, it will be yours, and if they come, they will share it with you.’<sup>63</sup>

There are instances of even more explicit ‘acts of inheritance,’ that appear in postwar narratives about the expropriation of Jews. One of them, recorded by Patrycja Dołowy, recounts the story of a Jewish woman, who comes to her non-Jewish neighbors to deposit with them her valuables before the feared deportation. The narrator is a woman who witnessed the scene as a child.

She [the Jewish neighbor] suddenly hugged me tight and started kissing me. ‘Open your hands’ she said, and placed in my palm rings, earrings and some pendants. ‘Just hold it tight, so that you don’t lose it.’ I was closing my fists tight ... And she added ‘this is your dowry now. I don’t need anything anymore, because we are not coming back.’<sup>64</sup>

This improbable encounter (why would the Jewish woman not ask for a hiding place in exchange for her jewellery?), retrieved from/reedited in the memory of a child, speaks volumes about the postwar desire to translate the dispossession of Jews that happened in the genocidal context into a neutral, non-traumatic, uncontroversial and benevolent act of gift giving.

Apart from this exculpating mechanism, another long-term social consequence of the myth of Jewish treasures is the irrational belief that the Jewish wealth is inexhaustible, and that Jewish treasures are still out there to be had. This conviction survives in the

former shtetls despite the, likewise widespread, realization that all sites that could have contained ‘Jewish treasures’ have already been thoroughly searched.<sup>65</sup> ‘I was too small,’ shared one interviewee from Biłgoraj, ‘when the postwar treasure hunts were going on, because I was just a few years old. Later, when I knew what it was all about, the treasures had all been gone.’<sup>66</sup> A respondent from Mir presents the same opinion: ‘Today, everything has already been collected in Mir. Some ten years ago, there were still a lot of finds. There were twenty, twenty-five people with metal detectors, even schoolchildren went searching.’<sup>67</sup> In Izbica, our respondents reported how cash troves that they found after the war inside Jewish houses turned out to be completely worthless, because banknotes had already decayed:

When I got married and we moved into a formerly Jewish house [*dom żydowski*], I was incredibly excited, because I thought: such a rich Jew used to live here, so I will surely find something. I dismantled it thoroughly, to the foundations. And I only found dollars eaten up by the rats, or something else, I don’t know. They were inside a wall. There was a wall that had a void inside, underneath the window sill. And I pulled the window sill out and it all fell out.<sup>68</sup>

Our interviewees also cited multiple stories of Jews, returning to their towns after the war, to retrieve buried treasures. A female respondent from Mir reported that her relative, who lived in a formerly Jewish house, witnessed how one night, back in the 1960s, a car pulled up in front of her house and some people excavated a large hole in the ground and then recovered something packed in large boxes. When asked who she thought the people were, she responded they must have been Jews because they ‘clearly knew what they were doing.’<sup>69</sup> The respondent also added that Jews of the town ‘were all ... very rich [because] they were tailors, shoemakers, tradesmen.’<sup>70</sup> A couple of interviewees from Izbica reported a similar story involving their grandmother, who, after the war’s end had a Jewish visitor – a man who used to live in the house she now occupied.

*Respondent 1:* He asked ‘will you let me come into that room?’ She said ‘come in’. And he opened a panel in the floor and it was full of dollars, there were so many gold roubles, five-rouble coins! My mother said ‘Good Lord! And I was washing this floor so many times and if [that panel] had only moved even once!’ And he grabbed [the money] and left immediately.

*Respondent 2:* That was not the way it actually happened. He came and told [our] uncle that there was a fortune here and they would share it. But then he grabbed it and ran away. All my uncle got were two five-rouble coins ...

*Respondent 1:* ... which he stole ...

*Respondent 2:* ... which slipped out and he managed to grab. And people laughed about him later about how stupid he was.<sup>71</sup>

The story, whose multiple versions suggest an attempt at auto-censuring the account in a way that placed the Polish hosts in a better light, reveals a sentiment of deep disappointment (detectible in the tone of voice), but also a sense of entitlement. The Jew reclaiming his hidden fortune is portrayed as an intruder and a dishonest person, ‘tricking’ the Pole out of a treasure which, in the understanding of the speakers, their ancestors genuinely deserved.

Such stories of Jews surreptitiously returning to their houses to retrieve their hidden riches fuel the imagination of the locals who become convinced that more treasures may still lie hidden. In fact, during our field research, we repetitively found ourselves in the

situation in which our respondents believed that research was just our cover to look for Jewish treasures. An interviewee in Bilgoraj, who showed me his cellar where, according to his account, someone had uncovered a buried treasure, insisted that my camera had a sensor that could scan the walls for treasures.<sup>72</sup> Another respondent in Mir, who found a trove of coins during some renovation work, proposed to my fellow researcher that she joins the search on his plot of land with the words ‘dig up to 1,5 meters deep and whatever you find will be yours.’<sup>73</sup>

### Figure of the cursed Jewish gold

Despite the fact that, as our field research reveals, the practice of looting Jewish valuables hidden in private houses, hideouts and in the ground was very widespread in former shtetls and that it tends to be retrospectively narrated as a morally neutral ‘treasure hunt,’ there is still a lingering sense of moral unease surrounding this topic. It finds expression in the narratives of haunting and divine punishment, directed at those who enriched themselves with the help of ‘Jewish treasures,’ or committed acts of desecration. For Yechiel Weizman, who observed the same figure of the ‘Jewish curse’ in relation to the destruction of Jewish sacred spaces, such as synagogues, or cemeteries, the stories of haunting, sudden deaths and a Jewish malediction express not only ‘a sense of moral and religious unease as a consequence of profaning religious sites’ but are also a manifestation of Christian fear ‘of God’s punishment for not saving the Jews’ during the Holocaust.<sup>74</sup> The figure of divine punishment appears also in accounts relating to immoral enrichment with ‘Jewish gold.’ These include, in the first place, the profanation of Jewish burial sites in search of valuables.<sup>75</sup> As Zuzanna Dziuban notes, stories of ‘sudden deaths or instances of madness’ or ‘unexpected and severe illnesses’ have circulated around the Bełżec death camp, where human remains and ashes were being repetitively unearthed and searched by the local population.<sup>76</sup>

The figure of a Jewish curse is applied in an analogical way also to express moral condemnation of ‘treasure hunts’ within the perimeter of Jewish burial sites (be it historical cemeteries or war-time mass graves) and acts of plunder/takeover of Jewish property that included an element of betrayal, dishonesty, denunciation, and complicity in the violence against Jews. A respondent from Brody notes that ‘those who want easy money [and] think [let’s] take this gold from the [Jewish] cemetery and make some good money, will not live long, [and the gold] will return to where it comes from.’<sup>77</sup> The same popular conviction is widespread in Belarus. After the house of a man involved in the desecration of a mass grave near Iūje got hit by a lightning, and he himself died in the ensuing fire, the local inhabitants concluded that ‘the Jewish God had punished him.’<sup>78</sup> The same sense of condemnation is expressed toward those who refused to return Jewish valuables entrusted to them for safekeeping during the war. ‘A few Jews escaped [the mass execution],’ recounts one respondent from Mir,

and they went to [a local] man and said that they buried gold under a linden tree, that he should take whatever he needs and return the rest to an envoy they would send. He didn’t return anything [to them] and his whole family died out [*i usia siam’ia peramerla*].<sup>79</sup>

In the Polish shtetls we investigated, similar stories of divine punishment existed in relation to those individuals who enriched themselves by betraying Jews in hiding.

Multiple respondents from Izbica related a story of a man, who took in a Jewish girl for hiding, accepting a sizeable amount of valuables from her father, but convoyed her to the gendarmerie station on the next day. ‘Their entire life, they did not have luck. Their *entire* life! [*całe życie im się nie wiodło*],’<sup>80</sup> emphasized one respondent, while the other added that ‘almost everybody in that household died a tragic death’ and that the curse would last ‘for seven generations.’<sup>81</sup> In Biłgoraj, we recorded a similar story of a farmer, who took in a Jewish family for hiding, but betrayed them, and, with the help of a few local armed men, robbed the Jews of their gold.

They took this gold and it was hidden in a wooden barrel, like where you used to store grain earlier in the villages. And it was [buried] in the grain. And the father fell ill and they sent him to a hospital. And the mother says [to her son]: ‘take the grain to the mill’ ... and he milled it all in the mill.

*Interviewer:* They milled the gold in the mill?

Yes, the turbines got turned on. Nobody knew! Nobody knew [that there was gold inside] ... So, they milled the gold and that was the end of that gold. And they remained paupers, like they were before.<sup>82</sup>

But, sometimes, even the act of appropriating the valuables found long after the war, and in a context which did not entail any direct wrongdoing toward Jews, becomes classified as a potential source of divine punishment upon the profiteer. A respondent from Mir, who recounts having found a ‘Jewish treasure’ in the cellar of a Jewish house in 1996, adds: ‘[the money] went the same way it came: I bought a car, and then immediately had an accident and crashed it.’<sup>83</sup> Another respondent from Mir, likewise, made a general comment about people who plundered Jewish gold: ‘they plundered a good deal of gold, for sure, but this gold surely did not bring them anything good; they say Jewish gold does not do you any good [*v prok ne idiot*],’<sup>84</sup> The same sentiment was expressed by a respondent from Brody, who noted:

This gold does not bring luck because it comes out of misery and blood. People said that whoever got hold of this gold, he did not have any use of it because it was cursed [*zagovor-eno*] ... It comes from misery. We are people of a different faith, but our set of values is the same. Those who follow the Jewish faith have a different God. But our God and their God expect the same thing. Those who are religious understand that this gold is a crime.<sup>85</sup>

The motif of the divine punishment for the immoral acquisition of ‘Jewish treasures’ appears also in the Jewish sources. The *yizkor bukh* of the town of Iūje, published in Tel Aviv in 1968, contains the following story about the already mentioned Belarusian family who plundered the mass grave in a nearby forest.

Finally, the few Jews in Ivie lived to see the revenge befell upon Shalapke. In the summer of 1956, while grazing the cows, a lightning struck Shalapke’s wife and killed her. Nothing happened to the cows that were there. In 1957 there was a fire in the family’s huts that burned everything, including the robbed Jewish items. Shalapke himself tried to find shelter in the attic, but fell and was severely burned. He was taken to the hospital and after three days of pains he died. His son was shot by the partisans for cooperating with the Germans during the war. In 1959, before we left the town, his only daughter died from cancer. The bitter end of the Shalapkies left a great impression in Ivie and in the area. The peasants treated it as a punishment from God and as a divine curse for the desecration of the graves, and people were horrified.<sup>86</sup>

The stories of divine punishment for enrichment with the ‘cursed Jewish gold’ point to the deep ambivalence of the postwar population of former shtetls toward the hidden Jewish valuables. Although the search for such, real or imagined, ‘Jewish treasures’ was an endemic phenomenon in all the areas investigated in our research project, and it appears to have been a practice that was both long-lasting and attracting an almost universal participation, local communities still perceived (some of) these activities as infringing on the shared social norms. The legends about Jewish God’s wrath define the perimeter of the taboo. While ‘regular’ plunder of possessions left behind by the murdered Jewish neighbors, or serendipitous postwar discoveries of hidden valuables inside Jewish houses, appear as less morally dubious for the contemporary inhabitants, the acts of scavenging Jewish burial sites, or denouncing Jews in order to take over their possessions, are deemed as more morally reprehensible.

The paradox of these two, seemingly conflicted strands of narrative, on the one hand, of the inexhaustible Jewish treasures awaiting to be discovered by adventurous treasure hunters, and, on the other, of the moral opprobrium and the supernatural punishment awaiting those who enrich themselves in this way, makes sense in the light of social identity theory. By means of the device of ‘exemplum,’ which provides a historically specific cautionary tale about the dangerous excess of plunder – as in the stories of divine punishment, which usually contain concrete details, such as names, locations, exact years of the events, etc. – the in-group, which perceives its positive social identity as threatened by the blemish of the immoral practice of plunder, reaffirms its ethical norms.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, by singling out concrete individuals as ‘black sheep’ whose behavior is particularly morally reprehensible (and deservedly punished by the divine intervention), the in-group can ‘restore its positive distinctiveness.’<sup>88</sup> The myth of the Jewish curse thus helps to redraw the boundaries of the in-group to exclude those who committed an excess of plunder, while helping the rest of the in-group, potentially also involved in the expropriation of Jews, but left ‘unpunished’ by the supernatural forces, as morally absolved of any wrongdoing.

The motif of the ‘cursed Jewish gold’ might also echo old peasant beliefs about the Jew as a sorcerer. Jewish gold that brings bad luck could be thus also seen as a result of magical activity and direct agency of Jewish victims that placed a curse (*zagovor*) on their valuables. Regardless of whether the punishment is a divine intervention, or was caused by the agency of the mortals, the topos permits the respondents to distance themselves from extreme cases of wrongdoing, and assert the existence of a communal moral code, even in the situation in which participation in some form of expropriation of Jews was a nearly universal experience in postwar East-Central European shtetls.

Despite the fact that accounts about ‘Jewish treasures’ were equally frequent in each of the shtetls we investigated, in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus, the stories of divine punishment and cursed gold differed slightly in each location. One notable difference we noticed was that the motif of divine punishment would typically appear in Belarusian and Ukrainian accounts in relation to the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and mass graves, whereas we did not register any such account related to grave desecration in the case of our Polish case studies. In Izbica and Biłgoraj, instead, the topos of ‘divine punishment’ typically referred to cases of betrayal, when local Poles took in Jews for hiding, accepting a rich remuneration, and then turned them in to Germans, or the local Polish police. At the same time, in both towns, we recorded multiple accounts of desecration of local Jewish cemeteries in search of gold, none of them, however, was

accompanied by a ‘cautionary tale’ about a divine punishment. This discrepancy might be dictated with the fact that the local communities defined the boundaries of taboo in a different way, and that the social acceptance for the desecration of Jewish cemeteries in the Lublin region was higher than in the areas of Belarus and Ukraine we investigated.

## Conclusions

There are a number of social consequences of the myth of Jewish treasures that impact the local communities of former shtetls. They include the persistent expectation that Jews should remain the ‘wealth-givers’; a widespread disregard for Jewish sites of burial or other material heritage (which is being penetrated, dismantled and destroyed in search of ‘treasures’); the conviction that the hidden Jewish riches are inexhaustible, which continuously propels further searches; the ‘adventurization’ and moral neutralization of plunder; and the belief that local non-Jews are the legitimate heirs of Jewish property. The belief in divine punishment for immoral enrichment, or sacrilegious forms of plunder (especially at sites of burial), both points to a sense of moral anxiety related to the phenomenon and allows an identity-saving procedure in which the gravest offenders (who become divinely punished) are cast out beyond the perimeter of the in-group. While all these consequences shape the interactions of Jews and non-Jews in these locales, have an impact on the state of local Jewish material heritage, and propel a certain ‘shadow economy of treasure hunting,’ with specialized and professionally equipped treasure hunters, collectors, and unofficial channels of distribution, they also have significance beyond the former shtetls themselves.<sup>89</sup>

The fact that the mass-scale Holocaust-related dispossession became sublimated in the collective imagination into the topos of the ‘Jewish treasure’ has a bearing even on state-level politics. The current Polish-US and Polish-Israeli tensions over the restitution of private Jewish property, and the highly defensive reaction of the Polish right-wing government (in power 2015–2023), which in 2021 passed a law introducing a thirty-year time limit on legal challenges to restitution claims, effectively stopping claims that have yet been unresolved, can be, in fact, traced back to the social impact of wartime dispossession of Jews.

The idea that Jews are by default wealth-*givers*, the neutralizing narratives that present looting as a morally harmless and merit-based treasure hunt, and the resulting conclusion that Poles are the natural heirs of Jews, directly explain angered reactions like that of a right-wing youth organization that in the summer of 2021 dumped a pile of debris in front of the Israeli embassy in Warsaw, with a placard reading ‘this is your property.’<sup>90</sup> The fear of Jewish restitution claims has not only a material base – in the fact that millions of Poles still inhabit houses that belonged to Jews, and which their ancestors might have taken over unlawfully. There is also a socio-cultural component. For the last seven decades Poles have trained themselves to narrate dispossession as a picaresque adventure and legitimate transmission of wealth. And just as much as it is difficult to forfeit the financial gains of Holocaust-related dispossession of Jews, it is also hard to give up the myth of one’s own innocence as ‘treasure hunters.’

## Notes

1. Bahdaj, *Uwaga!*, 215–25.

2. Gross and Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest*; Reszka, *Pluczki*; Dziuban, “Dark Facets of ‘Appropriation’”; Dziuban, “Atopic Objects.”
3. Batory, *Ostatni Świadek*.
4. Kuźmińska and Kuźmiński, *Sekret Kroke*; Siembieda, *Miejsce i imię*.
5. Kaiser, *Plunder*.
6. For more on this phenomenon, see: Lehrer, *Lucky Jews*.
7. Tokarska-Bakir, *Legendy o krwi*, 470–2; Cała, *Wizerunek Żyda*, 19–21, 148, 178–9; Engelking, “Between the Lord and the Jew,” 99; Lobach, “Kurgany, garadzishchy, skarby,” 10–39; Lobach, “Skarb real’ny i skarb ideal’ny,” 203–13.
8. Roman, cited in Dołowy, *Skarby*, 21–2.
9. For the wider context of expropriation of Jews, see: Grabowski and Libionka, *Klucze i kasa*; Stola, “The Polish Debate on the Holocaust”; Duch-Dyngosz, “Materialne ślady trudnej przeszłości w dawnych sztetlach”; Weizman, “Unsettled Possession”; Krzyzanowski, *Ghost Citizens*, 228; Krzyzanowski, “Holocaust Survivors and the Restitution.” For the phenomenon of profanation of former death camps by ‘treasure hunters,’ see: Gross and Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest*; Reszka, *Pluczki*; Dziuban, “Dark Facets of ‘Appropriation’”; Dziuban, “Atopic Objects”; Lobach, “Kurgany, garadzishchy, skarby”; Lobach, “Skarb real’ny i skarb ideal’ny.”
10. A common feature of all six towns is their complex heritage of shifting imperial rule. While, prior to 1795 (third partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), Iūje and Mir were located in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Biłgoraj, Izbica, Berezne, and Brody belonged to the Kingdom of Poland, this geography changed in the partition period, when Brody found itself under the Austrian rule (in 1772), while Iūje, Mir, Biłgoraj, Izbica (in 1795) and Berezne (in 1793) became part of the Russian Empire. All six towns returned under a single state dominion after the Treaty of Riga in 1921, when they found themselves within the borders of the Polish Second Republic.
11. The body of oral history interviews this article is based on comprises 139 semi-structured interviews with local inhabitants of the 6 towns under investigation, carried out between 2020 and 2022 by my research team: Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Alexander Friedman, Ina Sorkina, Ruslan Danylyuk, Natalia Trokhlyuk and myself.
12. In the sample of 44 interviews that mentioned hidden Jewish valuables found after the war, there were 33 mentions of the word ‘treasure’ and 72 mentions of the word ‘gold’ and 28 other expressions (‘money,’ ‘fortune,’ ‘coins,’ ‘riches,’ ‘dollars,’ etc.) I did not take into account utterances which did not use a more precise noun, e.g. ‘people found something,’ ‘something was there.’
13. A woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 8 August 2022.
14. A woman born in the 1950s, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Biłgoraj, 20 October 2021.
15. A man born in 1949, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Biłgoraj, 6 October 2021.
16. A woman born 1942, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 19 October 2022.
17. See: Grabowski and Libionka, *Klucze i kasa*; Stola, “The Polish Debate on the Holocaust”; Duch-Dyngosz, “Materialne ślady trudnej przeszłości w dawnych sztetlach”; Weizman, “Unsettled Possession”; Krzyzanowski, *Ghost Citizens*; Krzyzanowski, “Holocaust Survivors and the Restitution.”
18. Reszka, *Pluczki*; Dołowy, *Skarby*; Butnick, “Holocaust Mass Grave Looted in Ukraine.”
19. von Bieberstein, “Holes of Plenty,” 84.
20. For postwar desecrations of Jewish cemeteries and vandalism of Jewish sites, see: Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie*; Wiśniewski, *Nieistniejące mniejsze cmentarze żydowskie*; Weizman, *Unsettled Heritage*, 132–48. On necroviolence see: Dziuban, “Dark Facets of ‘Appropriation,’” 332–54; Dziuban, “Atopic Objects.”
21. Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland*; Ben-Sasson, “Antisemitismus als offizielle Regierungspolitik”; Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence*, 22.



22. Barkey and Katznelson, "States, Regimes and Decisions," 483, 489; Kalik, "Reassessment of the Jewish Poll Tax Assessment Lists," 255–60; Kalik, *Scepter of Judah*, 3–6, 12–13.
23. Some sources on East-European wave of pogroms between 1880 and 1921 suggest that military authorities would sanction a certain number of days of free looting and violence, but would then curtail it. Hagen argues that there is no official documentation pointing to such explicit 'permits,' the motif of an 'official' period of time for sanctioned pogrom violence appears, however, in many sources. See: Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland*, 510, see also: 143, 499, 504.
24. Najder, *Rewanż*, 228.
25. A man born in 1949, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Biłgoraj, 9 June 2022.
26. A man born in 1950, personal interview with Dominika Macocha, Biłgoraj, 17 October 2022.
27. A woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 8 August 2022.
28. A man born in 1976, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Iūje, 16 June 2021.
29. A man born in 1957, personal interview with Magdalena Waligórska, Biłgoraj, 8 July 2022.
30. A man born 1950, personal interview with Dominika Macocha, Biłgoraj, 17 October 2022.
31. A woman born in 1972, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 22 May 2021.
32. A woman born in 1932, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 17 October 2022.
33. A man born in 1965, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz and Magdalena Waligórska, 8 July 2022.
34. A man born in the 1950s, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 21 June 2022.
35. Dziuban, "Dark Facets of 'Appropriation'," 342.
36. A man born in 1976, personal interview with Ruslan Danylyuk, Brody, 13 January 2021.
37. A woman born in 1946, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Biłgoraj, 21 December 2021.
38. A woman, born in 1979, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Iūje, 21 July 2021.
39. For example, the destruction and repurposing of one of the Jewish cemeteries in Brody into a football stadium took place as late as in the 1980s. And the legal strife about the territory of the new Jewish cemetery in Biłgoraj, sold to an investor, is ongoing. See: Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Alexander Friedman, Ina Sorkina, Magdalena Waligórska, "A History of Overwriting: Jewish Cemeteries in Postwar Poland, Ukraine and Belarus," in this volume.
40. A woman born in 1949, a woman born in 1942, a woman born in 1941 and a man born in 1948, Skype interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 October 2020.
41. A man born in 1965, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz and Magdalena Waligórska, 8 July 2022.
42. A man born in 1950, personal interview with Dominika Macocha, Biłgoraj, 17 October 2022.
43. A woman born in 1946, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 17 October 2022.
44. A woman born 1954, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 18 October 2022.
45. Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie*, 43.
46. Kwiek offers the most detailed statistics of these violent crimes against Jews. He lists between 1074 and 1121 murders of Jews that took place in Poland in the period 1944–1947. Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie*, 215.
47. Ita Frajdenberg, oral history interview from the Collection of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, 6 November 1997 (translation from the Portuguese by Marcelo Aizen).
48. A woman born in 1965, Józefów, phone interview with Magdalena Waligórska, 11 September 2022.
49. Rachel Luchfeld (born Prozer), oral history interview from the Collection of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, 20 March 2000.
50. A question about the return to one's hometown was part of the standard questionnaire of the Shoah Foundation interviews. Out of 80 survivors who originated from Biłgoraj,

Izbica, Mir, Iūje, Brody, and Berezne, 38 individuals never returned to their hometown after the liberation. No information was available about three survivors.

51. See the account from Izbica, on page 13.
52. Ruslan Danyluck, personal interview with Alexander Friedman, 31 July 2020 and 10 August 2020; Volodymyr Koval'chuk, personal interview with Ruslan Danyluck, 26 December 2020; Vasył Strył'chuk, personal interview with Ruslan Danyluck, 29 December 2020.
53. A town official from Józefów near Biłgoraj, interview with Magdalena Waligórska, 12 July 2022.
54. Ruslan Danyluck, personal interview with Alexander Friedman, 31 July 2020, and 10 August 2020; Volodymyr Koval'chuk, personal interview with Ruslan Danyluck, 26 December 2020; Vasył Strył'chuk, personal interview with Ruslan Danyluck, 29 December 2020.
55. A man born in 1957, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Iuje, 12 May 2022.
56. Tamara Borodach, Zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 07 August 2020.
57. A man born in 1950, personal interview with Magdalena Waligórska, Biłgoraj, 11 July 2022.
58. "The Old Women Living in Itche Koval's Rickety Hut," 52.
59. A woman and a man born in the 1950s, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 21 June 2022.
60. Andrzej Leder speaks of the Polish society having 'sleepwalked' the revolution that unfolded between 1939 and 1956. Leder, *Przeżniona rewolucja*, 17.
61. A man born in 1971, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 3 January 2021.
62. Mosze Tejtłbojm, *Biłgoraj izkor buch / Księga pamięci Biłgoraja*, Jerusalem, 1955, 64. Cited after the Polish translation by Anna Szyba and Agata Kondrat.
63. A woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 8 August 2022.
64. Cited in Dołowy, *Skarby*, 25.
65. Alice von Bieberstein observes the same dynamics in relation to 'Armenian treasures' in present-day Turkey. See von Bieberstein, "Treasure/Fetish/Gift," 174–6; von Bieberstein, "Spoils and Treasures."
66. A woman born in 1946, Zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Biłgoraj, 21 December 2021.
67. A man born in 1971, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 3 January 2021.
68. A man born in the 1950s, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 21 June 2022.
69. A woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 8 August 2022.
70. Ibid.
71. A man and a woman born in the 1950s and a man born in the 1970s, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 21 June 2022.
72. A man born in 1957, personal interview with Magdalena Waligórska, Biłgoraj, 8 July 2022.
73. A man born in 1971, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 3 January 2021.
74. Weizman, *Unsettled Heritage*, 155.
75. Reszka, *Pluczki*, 185. On the cursed Jewish gold, see also Dołowy, *Skarby*, 210.
76. Dziuban, "Dark Facets of 'Appropriation,'" 347. See also Reszka, *Pluczki*, 185.
77. A man born in the 1960s, personal interview with Ruslan Danylyuk, 22 December 2020.
78. A woman born in 1949, Zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 8 July 2020.
79. A man born in 1970, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 20 March 2022.
80. A woman born in 1942, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 19 October 2022.
81. A woman born in 1939, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Izbica, 19 October 2022. The same story is also reported by Rafał Hetman: "The man who betrayed the child was called R.B. and later on his family did not prosper. There were only calamities. His son was sleighing down the hill with other children, no one got hurt except him, he hit a tree, fell into a well and drowned. His youngest daughter died recently. She was wearing mourning for three consecutive years, because first her father died, then her sister-in-law, and then her brother-in-law hanged himself." Hetman, *Izbica, Izbica*, 245–6.
82. A man born in 1950, personal interview with Dominika Macocha, Biłgoraj, 17 October 2022.

83. A man born ca 1970, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, Mir, 21 May 2021.
84. A woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 8 August 2022.
85. A man born in 1976, personal interview with Ruslan Danylyuk, 13 January 2021.
86. Shmeilowitz, "A Punishment from Heaven," 83.
87. Tokarska-Bakir, who analyzed the figure of the 'exemplum' in legends of blood libel, defines it, after Aron Gurievich, as a chronotope in which the earthly world intersects with the heavenly and the everyday with the mythical. Tokarska-Bakir, *Legenda o krwi*, 105, 107.
88. Turner, "Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group," 34; Hogg "Intragroup Processes, Group Structure and Social Identity," 79.
89. I am borrowing the term of 'shadow economy' from Alice Bieberstein, "Spoils and Treasures."
90. Pacewicz, "Młodzież Wszechpolska rozsypała gruz pod ambasadą Izraela."

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on collaborative research of my research team within the project: 'Mapping the Archipelago of Lost Towns: Post-Holocaust Urban Lacunae in the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands,' which I have pursued together with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Alexander Friedman, Ina Sorkina and Yechiel Weizman. Associated researchers: Ruslan Danylyuk and Natalia Trokhlyuk carried out the oral history interviews in Ukraine. Dominika Macocha helped during our fieldwork in Poland.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

## Notes on contributor

*Magdalena Waligórska* is a cultural historian and sociologist. Her fields of interest include: contemporary Polish and Belarusian history, nationalism and national symbols, Jewish heritage and popular culture, Jewish/non-Jewish relations, music and identity, and memory studies. She is currently leading an ERC-research group devoted to the history Holocaust dispossession at the Humboldt University in Berlin. She has published extensively on Jewish culture, Jewish-non-Jewish relations and nationalism, among others, in: *East European Politics and Societies*, *Holocaust Studies*, *East European Jewish Affairs* and *Jewish Cultural Studies*. She is the author of *Klezmer's Afterlife: An Ethnography of the Jewish Music Revival in Poland and Germany*, Oxford University Press, 2013 and *Cross Purposes: Catholicism and the Political Imagination in Poland*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

## ORCID

*Magdalena Waligórska*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7856-0831>

## Bibliography

"The Old Women Living in Itche Koval's Rickety Hut After Receiving a Fistful of Dollars ..."  
Israel Bilgoraj Society. Accessed September 7, 2022. <https://www.bil-is.com/tour%20to%20bilgoraj%202010%20first%20part.pdf>.

- Astashkevich, Irina. *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018.
- Bahdaj, Adam. *Uwaga! Czarny Parasol!* Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2020.
- Barkey, Karen, and Ira Katznelson. "States, Regimes and Decisions: Why Jews Were Expelled from Medieval England and France." *Theory and Society* 40, no. 5 (2011): 475–503.
- Batory, Jan, dir. *Ostatni Świadek*, 1969.
- Ben-Sasson, Haim Hillel. "Antisemitismus als offizielle Regierungspolitik in Osteuropa." In *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, edited by Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, 195–207. Munich: Beck, 1980.
- Butnick, Stephanie. "Holocaust Mass Grave Looted in Ukraine." *Tablet*, June 27, 2014. Accessed August 29, 2022. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/holocaust-mass-grave-looted-in-ukraine>.
- Cała, Alina. *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1992.
- Dołowy, Patrycja. *Skarby: poszukiwacze i strażnicy żydowskiej pamięci*. Wołowiec: Czarne, 2022.
- Duch-Dyngosz, Marta. "Materialne ślady trudnej przeszłości w dawnych sztetlach." In *Miejsce po, miejsce bez*, edited by Michał Niezabitowski, 47–58. Kraków: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2015.
- Dziuban, Zuzanna. "Atopic Objects: The Afterlives of Gold Teeth Stolen from Holocaust Dead." *Journal of Material Culture* 25 (2020): 408–427.
- Dziuban, Zuzanna. "Dark Facets of 'Appropriation': Grave Robbery at a Nazi Extermination Camp in Poland." In *Dispossession: Plundering German Jewry, 1933–1953*, edited by Christoph Kreutzmüller and Jonathan R. Zatlín, 332–354. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020.
- Engelking, Anna. "Between the Lord and the Jew: Some Remarks on the Identity Structure of Belarusian *Kolkhozniks* in the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries." *Acta Poloniae Historica* 109 (2014): 81–107.
- Grabowski, Jan, and Dariusz Libionka, eds. *Klucze i kasa: o mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950*. Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2014.
- Gross, Jan T., and Irena Grudzińska-Gross. *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Hagen, William W. *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Hetman, Rafał. *Izbica, Izbica*. Wołowiec: Czarne, 2021.
- Hogg, Michael A. "Intragroup Processes, Group Structure and Social Identity." In *Social Groups and Identities: Developing the Legacy of Henri Tajfel*, edited by Peter Robinson, 65–94. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996.
- Kaiser, Menachem. *Plunder: A Memoir of Family Property and Stolen Nazi Treasure*. Melbourne: Scribe, 2021.
- Kalik, Judith. *Scepter of Judah: The Jewish Autonomy in the Eighteenth-Century Crown Poland*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.
- Kalik, Judith. "Reassessment of the Jewish Poll Tax Assessment Lists from Eighteenth Century Crown Poland." In *New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands*, edited by Anthony Polonsky, Hanna Węgrzynek, and Andrzej Żbikowski, 255–260. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018.
- Krzyzanowski, Łukasz. *Ghost Citizens: Jewish Return to a Postwar City*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020.
- Krzyzanowski, Łukasz. "Holocaust Survivors and the Restitution of Jewish Private Property in Two Polish Cities, 1945–1948." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 35 (2021): 359–375.
- Kuźmińska, Małgorzata, and Michał Kuźmiński. *Sekret Kroke. Kraków, alchemia, śmierć i dziewczyna*. Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2009.
- Kwiek, Julian. *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie: Przejawy wrogości wobec Żydów w latach 1944–1947*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Nieoczywiste, 2021.

- Leder, Andrzej. *Prześlona rewolucja: Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*. Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2013.
- Lehrer, Erica. *Lucky Jews: Poland's Jewish Figurines*. Kraków: Ha!art, 2014.
- Lobach, Uladzimir. "Skarb real'ny i skarb ideal'ny va ūiaŭlenniah i praktykah belarускаi wioski XIX–XX st." In *Belaruskae Padzvinne: vopyt, metodyka, i vyniki paliavyh i mizhdyctsyplinarnyh dasledavanniaŭ*, edited by D. U. Duk, A.I. Korsak, and U. A. Lobach, 203–213. Navapolatsk: GDU, 2016.
- Lobach, Uladzimir. "Kurgany, garadzishchy, skarby: 'viaskovaia arhealogiia' na terytoryi Vitsebskhyny ū XIX–XX st." In *Belaruski Fal'klor: Materyialy i dasledavanni: zb. nauk. prats*, 10–39. Minsk: Bel. Navuka, 2017.
- Najder, Marcelli. *Rewanż*. Warszawa: Karta, 2013.
- Paciewicz, Piotr. "Młodzież Wszehpolska rozsypała gruz pod ambasadą Izraela: 'Oto wasze mienie'. Przebili Jakiego." OKO.press, July 1, 2021. Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://oko.press/mlodziej-wszehpolska-rozsypala-gruz-pod-ambasada-izraela-oto-wasze-mienie-przebili-jakiego/>.
- Reszka, Paweł Piotr. *Płuczki: Poszukiwacze żydowskiego złota*. Warszawa: Agora, 2019.
- Shmeilowitz, Dobe. "A Punishment from Heaven for the Shalapke Family." In *Sefer Zikaron le-kehilat Iwie*, edited by Moshe Kaganowitz, 631–633. Tel Aviv, 1968.
- Siembieda, Maciej. *Miejsce i imię*. Warszawa: Wielka Litera, 2018.
- Stola, Dariusz. "The Polish Debate on the Holocaust and the Restitution of Property." In *Robbery and Restitution: The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe*, edited by Martin Dean, Constantin Goschler, and Philipp Ther, 240–255. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007.
- Tejtlbojm, Mosze. *Biłgoraj izkor buch*. Jerusalem, 1955.
- Tokarska-Bakir, Joanna. *Legendy o krwi*. Warsaw: WAB, 2008.
- Turner, John C. "Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group." In *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, edited by Henri Tajfel, 15–40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Urban, Kazimierz. *Cmentarze żydowskie, synagogi i domy modlitwy w Polsce w latach 1944–1966 (wybór materiałów)*. Kraków: Nomos, 2006.
- von Bieberstein, Alice. "Treasure/Fetish/Gift: Hunting for 'Armenian Gold' in Post-Genocide Turkish Kurdistan." *Subjectivity* 10 (2017): 170–189.
- von Bieberstein, Alice. "Holes of Plenty." *Etnofloor, Waste* 33, no. 2 (2021): 75–90.
- von Bieberstein, Alice. "Spoils and Treasures: On War Economies, Citizenship and Exceptional Governance in Turkish Kurdistan." *FOCAAL, Special Issue "Situating Global Warring in Neoliberal Conjuncture"* (forthcoming).
- Weizman, Yechiel. "Unsettled Possession: The Question of Ownership of Jewish Sites in Poland after the Holocaust from a Local Perspective." In *Jewish Property After 1945: Cultures and Economies of Loss, Recovery and Transfer*, edited by Jacob Ari Labendz, 34–53. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Weizman, Yechiel. *Unsettled Heritage: Living Next to Poland's Material Jewish Traces after the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022.
- Wiśniewski, Tomasz. *Nieistniejące mniejsze cmentarze żydowskie: Rekonstrukcja Atlantydy*. Białystok: Kreator, 2009.