

# Holo-polo, or the sweet tales of the Holocaust

Holo-polo, o los dulces cuentos del Holocausto

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## Abstract

This article describes the phenomenon of editorial kitsch trends around the Holocaust literature and its impact on the Holocaust memory. "Holo-polo" is a way of dealing with the "discomfort" of the horrors of war and violence, by creating a more comfortable version of it. The article problematizes the ways of representation of a frequently debated and controversial issue, the Holocaust. By analyzing individual publications, the article addresses the issues of memory, forgetting, objectivity and truth of historical representation, and, inevitably, the ethical issue of historical fiction. The article argues that embellishing the history of the Holocaust is not only inappropriate, but also indecent. Instead of describing the horrors of the Holocaust, Holo-polo trivializes and misrepresents its significance, depicting melancholy, sentiment, and nostalgia in the light of a pop-cultural emotional trap. Or maybe is it just being moved by our own emotions. Kitschy *clichés* are misused and certainly do not serve memory, literature, or respect for Holocaust victims and survivors.

**Key words:** Holocaust studies, memory studies, nostalgia, literature, pop culture, false survivors

## Resumen

El artículo describe el fenómeno de la literatura kitsch del Holocausto y su impacto en la memoria y los falsos sobrevivientes. "Holo-polo" es una forma de lidiar con el "horror cómodo" y el horror de la guerra. Mediante el análisis de títulos individuales, el autor plantea una pregunta sobre la "verdad del recuerdo". Decorar y embellecer la historia del Holocausto no solo es inapropiado, sino también indecente. La banaliza y pierde sus significados originales, al tiempo que muestra melancolía, sentimentalismo y nostalgia a la luz de una trampa emocional pop-cultural. O tal vez simplemente somos movidos por nuestra propia emoción. El abuso de clichés kitsch no sirve ni a la memoria ni a la literatura y, desde luego, tampoco al respeto por las víctimas y las personas que han vivido la tragedia del Holocausto.

**Palabras clave:** estudios del Holocausto, estudios de memoria, nostalgia, literatura, cultura pop, falsos sobrevivientes

## Introduction

The "cultural industry" of the Holocaust and its kitsch-driven aesthetic in literature has been present in public debate since the 1960s, but there are also earlier ethical and philosophical works, such as those by Theodor Adorno, who emphasized the great importance of these philosophical problems. Adorno's famous statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno, 1949, p. 34), from the essay *Cultural Criticism and Society*, pointed to the challenges faced by the authors. The quote, even outside the rest of the context, summarizes the moral and artistic axis of the problem. On the one hand, a poet should deal with the literary canons; on the other, there will always be a possibility of abuse of historical memory of the Holocaust. There may be a relational difficulty with the represented object and the representation itself.

As far as the debates on representation of the Holocaust are concerned, I would especially like to mention several publications. In his work, Berel Lang (e.g. 2003, 2009) reflects on how genocide was depicted or should have been depicted in the texts written by philosophers who specifically explore the human condition. Lang tries to explain the weak reaction of academics to the Holocaust by analyzing the general philosophical culture, its tendency towards generalization, and its escape from individual historical events. In monographs by James E. Young (1983), we find a reflection on a "culture of competing catastrophes," in which every nation, ethnic group or minority identifies themselves as a people only in regards to a vicariously remembered destruction. This means that we look at the history of the Jewish people exclusively through the prism of that tragedy, when we visit the Holocaust memorials or read historical archival reports. Dominick LaCapra, in *Representing the Holocaust* (1994) and other works, attempts to grasp the tragedy of repressed trauma in postmodern Western culture. Testimonies of victims who turned their experience into artistic or philosophical representations are often overlooked. Without them, it is difficult to fully understand the issue of "opposing fiction" in the representation of the Holocaust. It is also important to note how recurrent the debates around the topic of the Holocaust are, which could be likely explained by its charged nature.

The point of departure for this essay were some ethical considerations that emerged when I was working on an idea for my book, which I have tentatively titled "Holomaps." For years, I have worked on the question of memory, including in the context of the Holocaust. I have written several literary and theoretical texts, and have had countless conversations and discussions on this subject. These works include, among others, the novel *Pocket Atlas of Women*, the short story

*Murano* (later staged as a theatre play), and historical research on the fate and heritage of women in the Warsaw Ghetto. It seemed to me that I already said everything I wanted to say regarding this topic. Yet the new idea came to mind: a reflective journey around the memorial sites both in Poland and abroad. To unfold the idea, I started thinking on several things: What kind of memory do I want to reflect on? Are there any limits to what could be represented? Are there any representations of boundaries? Those are the ethical concerns. I realized that, inadvertently, I was charting a map of inaccuracies and struggles, and I was asking too many questions. As a writer and a researcher, I treated my predecessors and their considerations as signposts, but not as the final answers.

My research trips included the following sites of the Holocaust: a memorial museum, the sites of the former concentration and labour camp –Treblinka, Auschwitz, Umschlagplatz, Lithuanian Ponary, and Bełżec. The mere names of these places remind of suffering across Europe. They are associated with artifacts, such as freight trains, shoes, chimneys, or unloading ramps, and emotions such as fear, panic, and suffering (Kurz et al., 2017). For years, this arsenal of images and words has been used in attempts to describe and understand the extermination of millions of Jews in Europe. But is our memory– changed and politicized –still able to reflect on the life of each one of them? I decided to write down my doubts. They felt symptomatic in the context of my observations of the editorial market in Poland– the country where the experience of the Holocaust is the dominant, and yet unprocessed, war experience of the 20th century.

The so-called “historical novels,” based on *clichés* and stereotypes, are commercial bores that feed on human suffering, and sooner or later will eat their own tails. To me, this was also a question about the past, memory, nostalgia, as much as it became the question of ethics. The article is also generally concerned with the phenomenon of commodification of trauma.

## Holo-polo

*The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (Morris, 2018) quickly became a bestseller in Poland, and the publishers started marketing similar style stories. I call this trend of publishing kitsch novels that feature striped uniforms, unloading ramps, and love stories Holo-polo. Holo-polo is based on the combination of the words “Holocaust” and “polo”: I use it to emphasize the mass unsophisticated form of art. The term alludes to disco-polo, a popular Polish music style that combines

dance melodies with simple, often ribald or romantic lyrics (Borys, 2019). Polish writers have also discussed this trend. For example, in his article in *Znak* magazine, (Szot, 2020) discusses the recent Holocaust novels and the TikTok #holocaustchallenge:

Films, in which young actors depict Holocaust victims and tell the story of their death “from beyond the grave” to the rhythm of a soundtrack straight from a cheap horror, have been widely criticized, including by the director of the Washington-based United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and on the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum Twitter feed. The hashtag #holocaustchallenge was removed by TikTok following “hate monitoring” procedures. Today, the accounts of users are blocked or deleted. They have also disappeared from Instagram and are banned on other social networks. (Szot, 2020)

Holo-polo protagonists include, among others, a midwife from Auschwitz, a teacher from Ravensbrück, a shoemaker from Treblinka. As a satirical gesture, designer Przemysław Dębowski published a mock cover of a book entitled *Auschwitz from Auschwitz* on his Facebook (Dębowski, 2020). It had all the typical features of this type of a publication: a title that refers to a Holocaust memorial site, a one-sentence blurb –“wonderful, magnetic, and sad”–, and a particular cover design. Holo-polo includes different cover designs, genres, and literary levels, but there is one common denominator: all these books are filled with cheap sentimental tones and emotions. Wiping away tears and excited to learn the allegedly historical truth, we go to the cash register. What we get is easy reading packaged in barbed wire. The reading does not stimulate empathy nor does it offer new knowledge; it is the product of instrumental abuse of history in favour of the market needs. Valuable relationships and memories are lost among the swirl of holo-polos.

Holo-polo commodifies historical and borderline events, such as death and suffering, while presenting itself as a documentary. It is alarming: the threat of trivialization leading to the diffusion of and re-evaluation of meaning, and directing the vector of interest from the victims to the consumers of such literature.

The attention devoted to Holocaust memory under certain conditions may become a “comfortable horror” (Linenthal, 1995; Lehrer, 2019): we mourn and proudly move on. It obscures, however, the real events. Hollywood films or mass-produced series of stories of comfortable horror are based on facts and evoke melancholic sweetness. They act as a band-aid of a kind for soul for their consumers; suffering becomes a spectacle. The phenomenon of “comfortable

horror” becomes an act of narcissistic self-indulgence, as if we say: “Look, we are so good that we care and read about violinists who turned a corner and play sentimental tunes while we contemplate the fate of Jewish orphans.” We watch them, amazed that they are still alive, although they look like corpses. Thanks to the medium of art, we are at a safe distance of actual horrors of the Holocaust.

The accounts of actual Holocaust survivors are also being published in Poland: diaries, memoirs, notes, literary texts, interviews, and excerpts from conversations and discussions. But the fictional accounts discussed here signal that we do not listen to those who were there, those who survived or managed to leave behind a trace of their life. Instead, we introduce new characters, whose goal is simply to entertain.

There are different forms of remembering and describing the Holocaust, such as Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1994), the large-format canvasses by Wilhelm Sasnal, or even Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* (1997). I also use grotesque and irony in my texts about war and people's experiences of it. And yet, certain misuses or forms are not only a matter of artistic flair, but also of simple decency, of ethics. In one of her interviews, reporter Hanna Krall honestly stated: “Decorating and embellishing the history of the Holocaust is not only inappropriate. It's indecent” (2020). Reporter, Holocaust survivor and novelist, Hanna Krall has been taking up the themes of humanity under extreme circumstances in her books such as *Shielding the Flame* (1977), *White Maria* (2011) or *The Subtenant* (1985). The question of what is appropriate and what is indecent is central to her work. But why is this not a concern for the Holo-polo authors?

In her blog article *Trivializing the Holocaust?*, Helen Maryles Shankman wrote that “there are so many books dedicated to Holocaust literature that readers experience a kind of overload. Yes, it was tragic, they say. Yes, millions were murdered. They've read *Anne Frank*. They've read *Night*. They've read *Maus*. They know. They know” (Shankman, 2016). The feeling is overwhelming, but it can – paradoxically– evoke the unhealthy fascination with horror that enables a simple look at an uncomfortable situation. This trivialization, according to Shankman, is an infinite recall of images so “impossible, so bizarre, so far-fetched, that they might as well be science fiction.” Her ironic question of whether she is capable of “going to make World War II new again” through writing is an introduction to the discussion of another, neoliberal participant. Here, in the capitalist publishing market, everything has to be new. And what to do with a history of more than eight decades? Perhaps, sell something we already know as a novelty that, like a favourite romantic comedy, can introduce us to the familiar feeling in-between relief and fear.

Let us look at a few recent Holocaust novels. Bestseller authors love shady characters and almost idyllic relationships, as in Heather Morris' novels *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, *Cilka's Journey* (2019), *Stories of Hope* (2020), and *Three Sisters* (2021). Inaccuracy, distortion, and lack of respect for the victims were condemned by the director of Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and leading researchers and authors in the field of Holocaust memory and history (Hirsch, Lániček, Mitschke & Shields, 2019; Wanda Witek-Malicka, 2018). It does not mean to say that romance novels should not be published, but the question remains: Why should they be set against the backdrop of the greatest tragedy of the 20th century?

## Stalag

Who has the right to write about the Holocaust? How should we write about it? Perhaps we should rather ask ourselves: why should we write about it? Usually, when we deal with memories, accounts, or fictionalized descriptions of an experience, the goal of the text is to portray cruelty and, implicitly, to be aware, never forget and learn from it. The survivor told the story, and whoever saw it felt it with every part of their body.

Today, authors can locate their narratives wherever they want because there are fewer and fewer survivors among us. Few can stop the author and say: "It wasn't like that." A perfect situation for the writer: there are no witnesses, and they can let their imagination run wild and if anyone says that the facts are inaccurate, they can respond, "The novel has the right to be wrong." One can blend characters, events, and even choose the genre.

References to stalag fiction that flourished in Israel in the 1950s and early 1960s got new attention. The genre features POW camps and the descriptions of abuse and sex. The National Library of Israel holds a collection of stalags, defined elsewhere as follows:

Stalags were a short-lived phenomenon, only lasting a handful of years before being made illegal. Curiously, they reached the height of their popularity during the famous Eichmann trial. Originally said to simply be translations of English authors, on closer inspection, the genre seems to have been fully Israeli. Almost the only pornographic material available, it was purchased by teenagers, often the children of Holocaust survivors. (Atlas Obscura, 2022)

Journalist Sobolewska (2020) compared the genre to the *50 Shades of Gray* by E.L. James in a barracks setting. Among publishers, stalag-style stories seem to be in demand.

The next question that comes out of the previous discussion is “Can I pretend that I remember something I didn't live through?”

There are numerous accounts of false Holocaust children who made their fortunes selling fantasies about their suffering. Misha Defonseca claimed that as a seven-year-old Holocaust survivor she had crossed half of Europe with only a compass, bread, and a knife in her pocket. She led a pack of wolves in the dense forests. Her story published as *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* in 1997 brought her a fortune.

Another famous hoaxer was Bruno Dössekker, a Swiss citizen. In 1995, he published –as Benjamin Wilkomirski– his purported experiences under the title *Fragments. Memories of a wartime childhood*. In the following years, the autobiography was translated into 13 languages and sold half a million copies. The narrator is a Jewish child living with his parents in Latvia. In 1942, his father dies in front of him, and the Nazis take him, his mother, and his brother to Majdanek and later to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Mengele himself conducts experiments on the boy. When *Fragments* received the prestigious Jewish Book Award and the British Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize –and thus the stamp of authenticity– Dössekker/Wilkomirski became a global celebrity. Documentaries films were made about him, he was featured at debates and seminars about the Holocaust in Europe, the US, and Japan. He appeared on Oprah Winfrey's talk show, where another Holocaust author, Laura Grabowski, “remembered” how she “saw” little Benjamin in Auschwitz. His memoirs were later debunked by journalist Daniel Ganzfried, the son of a camp prisoner.

In 1971, Jew from Warsaw, Mieczysław Grajewski, published as Martin Gray a bestselling memoir entitled *For Those I Loved*. He was allegedly tasked with breaking up German prisons in occupied Poland, and then escaped from Treblinka. He was accused of fraud and fabricating history, as well as plagiarism. Marie Sophie Hingst, a historian from Germany, for years, wrote for newspapers and appeared in radio and television broadcasts about the Holocaust, sharing the imaginary story of her family, supposedly murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Another impostor, Enrico Marco, while appearing on Spanish television, shared his imaginary experiences from the Flossenbürg camp. He even had a camp number tattooed on his arm.



The claims of false victims create the sense of artificiality of trauma, and while they do not necessarily trivialize the memory of the Holocaust, they do give arguments to those who deny it.

## Conclusions

Assmann (2013) speaks of two types of memory: individual and collective. The former is a collection of personal memories, firmly anchored in emotions, including stories, objects, impressions, and relationships with a given situation. This applies both to what we experienced personally and what is passed on to us, which could be called post-memory (Hirsch, 1992). Hirsch (2019) asks: “Can we remember other people’s memories?” and responds: “I believe that we can and that we do” (p. 172). We can do it with “the stories, images and behaviors” we grew up with (Hirsch, 2019, p. 172).

Collective memory, according to Assmann (2013), is the effect of a set of remembered things, the aim of which is to be uniform and unambiguous. Many researchers deny the existence of collective memory, based on its fictional and mythical nature and hidden ideology involved in the process of memory production (Assmann, 2013).

When looking at some museum projects in Poland, one can also feel an excess, superfluous form, a wide selection of gadgets or publications related to the topic. The constant focus on what has already happened conceals the context of remembering, and the celebration of the past may lead to a revival of resentments or a release of destructive energy; for instance, Assmann refers to the examples of German memory of the Second World War.

Perhaps, when it comes to popular literature, collective memory is not only transformed (or even colonized), but also abused to achieve particular goals. At this point in my considerations, I would like to change direction and propose that taking collective memory and breaking it into fragments of the Holo-polo of history may be an attempt to tame trauma and treat it as collective experience and as pop culture. In this sense, every alteration, misrepresentation, and manipulation become an element of a game played to remember, to preserve a phenomenon as eternal and stimulating experience. All tricks are allowed, including the rhetoric, seemingly distant to the actual historical event. This is an extreme exercise where

the final results are suspended in a tension between silent contemplation over the tragic memory.

I would like to finish this article with several questions: How do contemporary Holocaust sites interact with our habits or prejudices? How do artistic depictions of genocide perpetuate the myths of a shared history? And most importantly, why do we need all this remembering? After all, the past repeated many times is said to be less and less audible. Something we emphasize, again and again, slowly fades away and ends up in a drawer marked "fairy tales." And, as is the case with Holo-polo literature, the memory of the Holocaust is trivialized; its original meanings are stripped off.

I decided to postpone my project of a book about Holomaps and my thoughts on places of remembrance indefinitely. Too many pitfalls of misusing what is etched into our identity can be harmful to memory itself. Buryła, Krawczyńska & Leociak (2020) wondered what kind of language could describe such liminal experience as death. The question is simultaneously suspended and valid. The kitschy *clichés* of Holo-polo writing and publishing do not contribute to either memory or literature and present significant ethical issues regarding the respect and memory of the victims who have experienced the nightmare of Holocaust. They do not refer to violence— they embody it.

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