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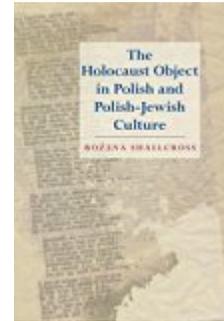
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bożena Shallcross. *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 181 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35564-5.

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The Nazi Violation of the Human Body and Material Objects

The dust jacket to Bożena Shallcross's new book brilliantly captures the multiple strands of her analysis of Polish and Polish Jewish meditations on quotidian material objects of the Holocaust during and immediately after the war. The cover features a somewhat faded image of a wartime poem by Władysław Szlengel (1914-43) that is typed on crumpled, torn paper. Szlengel wrote about ordinary material objects, bearing witness to the violence overtaking him. In one of his poems "Things" (Rzeczy), written in 1943 just before his death, Szlengel portrayed a still life of an apartment after a Nazi "action." Shallcross argues that Szlengel's depiction of abandoned objects metonymically articulates the Nazi destruction of normalcy and human life. He wrote:

In the abandoned flats
scattered bundles,
suits and comforters,
and plates and stools,
fires are still dwindling,
idle spoons lie about,
thrown out in a hurry
family photographs (p. 22).

We are fortunate that this poem—along with the other texts that Shallcross examines by Zuzanna Ginczanka, Zofia Nałkowska, Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and Tadeusz Borowski—survived the Nazi occupation of Poland. Many such objects did not escape the multiple threats to their existence. Indeed, Shallcross applies the term "precarium" to her texts to demarcate their ontolog-

ical fragility as artifacts that made it through the precarious wartime and postwar conditions of creation, itinerancy, and archiving.

Moreover, we are fortunate that these fragments survived because they provide us with searing glimpses into the nature of the Nazi occupation of Poland. As Shallcross compellingly shows, Szlengel, Ginczanka, Nałkowska, Miłosz, Andrzejewski, and Borowski all focused on the wartime fate of ordinary material objects in especially intense and vivid ways. They wrote about the seizing, sifting through, recycling, and abandonment of things, the detritus of genocide—sheets, desks, dishes, tables, shoes. In so doing, these early scribes of the Holocaust created some of the first attempts to represent the Nazi murder of European Jews. As Shallcross writes: "I believe that the nature of this genocide is representable, even though those who lived through it, and first spoke of it, were given no real opportunity or time to master strategies of representation that would express their experience. This representation occurs more vividly when the Holocaust experience is evoked through ordinary objects" (p. 11).

Two early writers of the Holocaust, along with Shallcross's illuminating analysis of them, struck me most powerfully. The first writer is little known outside the field of Polish Jewish studies. Born in 1917, Zuzanna Polina Gincburg, who published under the pen name of Zuzanna Ginczanka, was a noted poet in Warsaw's interwar literary scene. When the Nazis invaded Poland

in 1939, she fled to her hometown of Równe and then to Lwów, before ending up in Kraków, where she was executed in December 1944 in a Gestapo prison courtyard. While Ginczanka wrote little during the war, her untitled poem of 1942, which somehow made it to a childhood friend who submitted it for publication in 1946, wrenchingly tells of plundering and death in Ginczanka's own bedroom.

The ordinary objects of her bedroom function as props of murder. Ginczanka's enumeration of her things in the poem, as Shallcross puts it, "becomes so intense that the reader can feel [them] almost tangibly" (p. 44). And yet this is not a poem of self-pity; it is one, rather, of jouissance in Shallcross's reading. Ginczanka secured an uncanny victory over her perpetrators; she endowed her Polish neighbors—whom she called "my dear ones"—with the inheritance of permanent guilt for their participation in looting and murder, a guilt to which her blood-soaked goods would remind them long after the war had ended.

O, how they will work, like a house on fire,
Skins of horsehair and sea grass,
Clouds from torn pillows and feather beds apart
Will cling to their hands, will change both hands into
wings;
My blood will glue the oakum with fresh down
And will suddenly transform the winged to angels (p. 38).

Shallcross has rendered Ginczanka's poem into English for the first time; the poem will now receive the broader audience that it most certainly deserves.

Borowski is the second early writer of the Holocaust whose poetry Shallcross examines with particular force. While Borowski has received no shortage of attention, Shallcross provides fresh analysis of his work. She examines, among other themes, the loss of tactility in his writings, analyzing the ending to Borowski's "A Day at Harmenz." Borowski concluded this story with the image of Becker, an older Polish Jewish prisoner who is near

death, struggling to feel his way to his last meal. Becker is "vainly groping with his hand for the board to pull himself on to the bunk," Borowski wrote (p. 117). Shallcross argues that Borowski articulated here the Nazi destruction of the human body and its sense of touch. He revealed a process of degradation that ended with the body turning almost into an object. In Borowski's words: "I stared into the night, numb, speechless, frozen with horror. My entire body trembled, and rebelled, somehow even without my participation. I no longer controlled my body, although I could feel its every tremor" (p. 125).

Shallcross has written an erudite book that provides novel insights into a broad range of themes, including memory, representation, ethics, the human senses, and Polish Jewish relations. From my perspective as a cultural historian of memory and of the Holocaust, I see her book making two key interdisciplinary contributions. First, Shallcross labors, in many ways, as a cultural historian as much as she does as a literary scholar. Her analysis of Polish and Polish Jewish responses to the Holocaust as it was taking place (or just shortly after it ended) vividly reconstructs the Nazi destruction of Polish Jewry and the distinct literary encounters with human violence that the Holocaust engendered. Her book marks a significant addition to the historiography of the Holocaust. Second, Shallcross's work enriches our understanding of early Polish and Polish Jewish responses to the Holocaust. Analyzing Miłosz's poem "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto," she pauses to reflect on the significance of its creation: "To my knowledge, no non-Jewish author who lived under the terror of the Nazi rule would have signed an audacious poetic document of this caliber. The fact that Miłosz kept his poem close to him, in a suitcase, demonstrates an incredibly high level of both self-awareness and ethical conscience fused with a sense of responsibility" (p. 83). In analyzing the artifacts of writers who took up the ethical and precarious charge of testifying to the destruction engulfing and surrounding them, Shallcross has written an important book.

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