

## Remembering the Forgotten

Our town of Olkusz, known as the “Silver City”, has a rich history reaching back to the Middle Ages. For centuries it was an important centre of ore mining. My family had been settled here for several generations when I was born, seven years after the end of World War II, and I have lived here all my life. It’s a good place to live; it suffers from few of the problems that beleaguer big cities, while at the same time providing access to culture, good schools and jobs: most residents are able to find jobs locally.

But gradually, a dozen or so years ago, I began to realise that there was something wrong with this superficial view: something important was missing from this picture. It dawned on me that our image of this town I know so well, of its history both before and during World War II, is in large measure false: the Jews are missing.

From my earliest childhood I remember the annual ceremonies marking “Bloody Wednesday”, when the Germans brutally tortured the town’s male residents, and the day of the “20 dead”, when they murdered twenty Polish prisoners. I remember commemorations of the January Uprising and, once we were no longer a “People’s” Republic, of the battles fought during the Great War by Piłsudski’s Legions.

There were other official commemorations and days of remembrance; this is only a partial list. But why is there no mention of Olkusz’s Jewish population? Why no commemorations of the thousands of Jewish residents murdered during the war?

This is a question for all of us, residents of Olkusz. Do we have an answer? Why did we erase those tragic events from our memories for all these decades? Why, even today, do the annual ceremonies honouring the memory of those murdered by the Germans in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp go unnoticed by much of our town’s population? Why did I myself fail for so long to ask these questions? Why were there no cries of protest when, in the late 1950s, the remnants of Olkusz’s historic synagogue - one of the last visible traces of the town’s Jewish population - were destroyed? Why did my parents never talk about this with outrage? I don’t think they talked about it at all. Why was it not until the 21st century that I learnt of the hanging, in 1942, of three Olkusz Jews in what is now Kościuszki street? Why this hole where my historical memory should be, despite the fact that at elementary school I was friends with a boy from what was by then probably the town’s only remaining Jewish family?

There are many more such questions. Is there a simple answer? Today, the most frequent reaction I encounter in my attempts to delve deeper into the

history of the Jews of Olkusz and the ways in which it is (or is not) commemorated is not so much antisemitism as a simple lack of interest. This is often the result of ignorance, but in some people it leads to a shocking indifference to preserving and honouring the memory of our Jewish neighbours murdered during the war. Another factor that may come into play is the religious, and to some extent also cultural, gulf between the Jewish and Christian populations, which perceive each other as somehow "alien". Vestiges of medieval religious attitudes towards Jews, never entirely extinguished in the Catholic Church, might also persist among some people. Finally, some people may simply feel uncomfortable at the thought that a great part of the town's assets which now belong to them were looted from the town's Jews by the Germans during the war.

These are answers of a sort, certainly, but for me personally they are not enough to explain the hole on our town's memory. All these things hinder efforts to preserve the memory of the Jewish community in Olkusz and in effect falsify our local history. And this despite the fact that there were (happily) hardly any crimes against Jews committed in our town.

When we consider this state of affairs, we might wonder whether Hitler's plans to exterminate the Jews and obliterate all trace of their physical presence, together with the memory of their social and cultural role in Polish history, are in fact succeeding, and whether we, the residents of Olkusz, have more or less consciously played a part in this. However, the hard work put in over many years by a group of people of Olkusz in their noble efforts to preserve the history of the town's Jewish community and commemorate its tragic end, efforts supported by the town authorities, suggest that such a picture may be overly gloomy.

A very important stage in those efforts is the present book by Krzysztof Kocjan - an extraordinary, one might even say monumental, work, which presents a picture both broad and detailed of Olkusz's Jewish community before the war. I see it not only as a successful effort to preserve a significant period of our history from oblivion but also as Olkusz's first, and alas very belated, monument to its lost Jewish population. The book remembers thousands of individual people, of whom only a handful survived the war: the men, women and children who were our neighbours, and the hundreds of places connected with them - the places where they lived alongside us and played such a large part in the life of our town.

I also hope that this book encourages Olkusz to recover the true picture of its history and preserve the memory of the people with whom its darkest period in the 20th century is so tragically bound. The author himself no doubt hopes that it will also help those who survived the Holocaust, and their children, in their efforts to reconstruct the history of their families. When they come to Olkusz (even if for many of them it will only be a virtual visit), they will be

able to identify the places where their ancestors lived and pray for them, and remember neighbours they may have heard about in family stories.

Michał Ostrowski

*(English translation by Agnieszka Kołakowska)*