

Literature in Translation 247 / Slavic 245 / Jewish Studies 230
REPRESENTING THE HOLOCAUST IN POLAND: ETHICAL ISSUES

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Course description

The aim of the course is to facilitate an exploration of problems involved in representing the Holocaust in literature. In this course, students reflect on their own understanding of these problems, learn about methodological approaches to studying these problems, and apply new ideas and methods to their research projects.

Please note: This course is not about the history of the Holocaust. Instead, it concentrates on exploring the challenges posed by attempts to represent the Holocaust in literature and by ethical dilemmas involved in these attempts.

This course focuses on literary analysis, therefore it takes a methodological approach that is different from the approach used in history as a discipline. For example, historians use narratives of Holocaust survivors for validation of historical facts, while literary critics insist that these texts must be understood in terms of genre and convention.

The starting point for this course is Vaclav Havel's description of a play as an "existential encounter" that can change the audience member who sees it. To take a Humanities approach to texts, then, is to be open to being challenged by what we read. A Humanities approach invites us to allow a text to root itself into our minds. It encourages us not to distance ourselves from a text, but to interact with it in a way that can change us.

Learning objectives

1. to read carefully, with close attention to diction, syntax, and tone
2. to grasp multiple meanings from a single word, phrase, or symbol
3. to think creatively about how to understand silences in texts
4. to study how writers grapple with the paradoxical challenge of putting the experience of unspeakable suffering into words; to study how writers deal with the grief, the fear, and the anger that are part of the experience of traumatic loss
5. to probe possible mixtures of feeling that may be concealed beneath a text's inexpressive or emotionless surface
6. to approach literary texts as sites of ethical reflection and to explore ethical dilemmas surrounding representations of the Holocaust in literature

7. to be alert to multiple alternative interpretations

Required books

Jerzy Andrzejewski, *Holy Week*

Michal Glowinski, *The Black Seasons*

Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (**please note:** the only acceptable edition of Gross's book in this course is an expanded edition, published by Penguin in 2002)

Hanna Krall, *The Subtenant; To Outwit God*

Halina Zawadzka, *Living in Fear on the Aryan Side*

Recommended book

Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds.), *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*

Course policy

1. This course is open to eligible students.
2. Students are expected to come to class on time and to stay from the beginning to the end of each class session, participating fully in class discussions. If you are absent, it is your responsibility to find out from your classmates what was covered in class. Attendance and active participation are vital and count toward the final grade.
3. Required books and handouts should be brought to class to facilitate analysis and interpretation.
4. All writing assignments should be submitted in hard copy. Electronic submissions will not be accepted.
5. Late writing assignments will not be accepted. You will receive a grade of F for a writing assignment that was not submitted on the due date.
6. If you miss a quiz or an exam, for whatever reason, there will be no make-up quiz or exam. You will receive a grade of F for the missed quiz or exam, and your course grade will be calculated accordingly.
7. Academic integrity/misconduct: When you use published and/or unpublished sources (e.g., books, articles, Internet materials, classmates' presentations, instructors' lectures and comments), you need to acknowledge these sources in your papers. Failing to acknowledge these sources

amounts to plagiarism. Plagiarism will result in a serious penalty: a grade of F for the course.

8. All electronic devices - laptops, cell phones, iPods, beepers, etc. - should be turned off during class.

9. Eating during class is not permitted.

Requirements and assessment

Attendance and active participation (10 pts).

4-5 quizzes to test your familiarity with the required books (35 pts).

Two exams based on course readings, class discussions, and class presentations (40 pts).

Final paper (15 pts).

Graduate students who take this course as SL 799 are exempted from the exams. Instead, they will read additional materials of their own choice and write a potentially publishable research paper, due during the finals week. Graduate students who have taken Polish language courses are required to use all primary sources and at least some secondary sources in Polish in their final papers.

Overall, grading in this course is based on:

- ** your knowledge of the course material
- ** the quality of your research (breadth, depth, originality)
- ** attendance and active participation

A note on Internet research

Not all Internet sources are equally reliable or of equal quality. Some widely available Internet materials, such as Wikipedia, may be based on incorrect, limited, or outdated information. When doing research for writing assignments, please follow these guidelines:

- ** Use the Memorial Library research database. The Memorial Library subscribes to reliable online providers such as JSTOR.
- ** Evaluate the reliability of Internet sources by checking who published them: an organization such as JSTOR or an individual? a reputable press (e.g., a university press) or a “vanity” press? a peer-reviewed scholarly journal or a popular magazine?
- ** Use at least two secondary sources and compare how each of them presents a particular topic or issue.

Research tips are available at: <http://library.wisc.edu/research-tips/>. For more help, contact the Memorial Library’s “Ask a Librarian” page: <http://library.wisc.edu/ask/>

Course outline

Please be sure to keep up with reading assignments and to bring the required books and handouts to class.

Week

1 Introduction (Tuesday)
Reading period (Thursday)

2-3 Literary-ethical inquiry into pre-Holocaust literature

Aleksander Swietochowski: "Chava Ruby" (in *Stranger in Our Midst*; handout)

Study questions: (1) Describe Chava. Identify at least five traits that characterize her.
(2) How can we explain the fact that the narrator of this short story respects and even admires Chava, but despises her husband, Simcha?
(3) Identify the people who help Chava succeed.
(4) Who is Franek? Compile all the information you can find about him in the short story.

Maria Konopnicka: "Mendel Gdanski" (in *Stranger in Our Midst*; handout)

Study questions: (1) Identify the attackers in this short story.
(2) What precisely does the watchmaker hold against Jews?
(3) Why does Mendel become deeply disillusioned with the Polish community (see p. 235), even though several Poles did try to protect him and his grandson? Is he being ungrateful or unfair?

3-4 Controversies over Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*
Quiz on Gross's *Neighbors*

Please note: The only acceptable edition of Gross's book in this course is an expanded edition, published by Penguin in 2002.

To prepare for the quiz:

(1) Read *Neighbors*, including the Afterword to the expanded edition of this book. It is strongly recommended that you also read the Introduction to *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (2004), ed. Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic. The Chronology in *Neighbors Respond* (pp. 451-58) is also very helpful.

(2) While reading *Neighbors*, take notes and draft your responses to the following topics and questions:

- a. Reconstruct the events that took place in Jedwabne in late June and early July 1941.
- b. Discuss the historical context of those events. Identify the military, political, and ideological changes that occurred in the Jedwabne region in late June and early July 1941.
- c. Who were the actual perpetrators in Jedwabne on 10 July 1941? What do we know about their social, educational, occupational, and religious backgrounds? What were the motivations of the actual perpetrators?

Questions for class discussion: How does the ending of Jan T. Gross’s English translation of *Neighbors* (see p. 114) differ from the ending of the Polish original? What are the implications of these textual differences?

Please note: *Neighbors* was originally written and published in Polish in 2000. The translation of *Neighbors* into English, undertaken by the author himself, has resulted in a somewhat different version of the book. In the English version, Gross has introduced some changes in the structure of his argument and in the amount and kind of detail provided in the main text and in the endnotes. He has also changed the ending (p. 114).

- 5 Different conceptions of the poet’s ethical obligation or responsibility for Holocaust victims
Tadeusz Różewicz: “The Survivor” (handout)
Czeslaw Milosz: “Campo di Fiori” (handout)
Wisława Szymborska: “Still” (handout)

Please note: The original Polish title of Szymborska’s poem, “Jeszcze,” does not refer to stillness or motionlessness, but to continuity or a lack of change (i.e., to something that still occurs or persists). In the English translation, the title is ambiguous.

- Study questions:** (1) Regarding Różewicz’s poem: why do some Holocaust survivors want to remain silent?
(2) How does each of the poems deal with a problem that can be stated thus: to write poetry in an age of propaganda and hate speech is to risk being complicit with a language degraded or prostituted by manipulative, propagandistic agendas?
(3) How does the speaker (i.e., the lyrical persona or the lyrical I) in each of these poems combat (if s/he does indeed combat) a pair of counterforces: (a) the temptation to withdraw into traumatized silence; (b) the requirement of bearing witness and preserving the memory of the Holocaust?

- 6-7 Literary works that challenge us to think, again and again, about what it means to remember the Holocaust in the present
Ida Fink, “The Table” (handout)

- Study questions:** (1) In five or six sentences, describe what the point of this play is.
(2) Is the dramatic genre more effective than poetry and prose fiction as a prism of transmission

and understanding of the Holocaust experience? If the dramatic genre is indeed more effective, what, in your opinion, contributes to its effectiveness?

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Six-week exam: Thursday, 7 March

Format: essay questions.

- 8 Controversies over Hanna Krall's *To Outwit God*
 Hanna Krall: *To Outwit God*

Study questions: (1) When Hanna Krall's interview with Marek Edelman was first published in Poland in 1976, many readers protested. Why? When Krall's book was translated into Hebrew and published in Israel in 1982, it sold very poorly. Only several hundred copies were sold.

Many people refused to buy the book. Why? To begin to address these questions, it is necessary to explore several other questions. What are typical expectations regarding narratives about a heroic armed resistance such as the Warsaw ghetto uprising? What do we get in *To Outwit God*? What is the point of this particular approach to representing the Warsaw ghetto uprising?

(2) How much does Edelman talk about his work as a cardiologist and about his patients? How much does he talk about his memories of the Warsaw ghetto uprising? What are the implications of this particular textual distribution?

(3) In the interview, Krall is constantly trying to pry information from Edelman, but he often responds with "After all, it doesn't matter [...]. Can't all of you understand that none of it matters anymore?!" (p. 144), or "After all, it doesn't matter at this point" (p. 237), or "And besides, [...] what does it matter? [...] What difference does it make today?" (p. 238). What are we to make of these and other similar statements?

- 9 The problem of constructing a Holocaust memoir (1)
 Michal Glowinski: *The Black Seasons*
 Quiz on Glowinski's *The Black Seasons*

To prepare for the quiz, read *The Black Seasons* and compile your notes in response to the following topics and questions:

(1) What happens to Glowinski and his family when World War II breaks out? How does he and his parents survive the Holocaust?

(2) How much does Glowinski actually remember? What does he say about his memory process? How does his memory process influence or shape the structure of his narrative?

(3) While living "on the Aryan side," Glowinski witnesses and/or experiences first-hand a broad spectrum of Polish reactions to the Nazi extermination of Jews during World War II. Identify and discuss at least 4 Polish reactions recorded in *The Black Seasons*.

Questions for class discussion: The English title, *The Black Seasons*, is an accurate translation of the Polish title (*Czarne sezony*). But both versions of the title raise many questions: Why seasons rather than, say, years? Why black rather than, say, dark or bleak? Why black rather

than bloody? (After all, there is a reference to an “enormous pool of blood” after an execution in the Warsaw ghetto, p. 11.) What are your thoughts about the implications of the title of Glowinski’s book?

Spring recess: 23-31 March

- 10 The problem of constructing a Holocaust memoir (2)
Halina Zawadzka: *Living in Fear on the Aryan Side*

Study questions: (1) While living “on the Aryan side,” Halina Zawadzka witnesses and/or experiences first-hand a broad spectrum of Polish reactions to the Nazi extermination of Jews during World War II. Identify and discuss at least 4 Polish reactions recorded in Zawadzka’s book.

(2) What is the importance of gender in Holocaust testimony?

(3) The Polish title of Zawadzka’s book is *Uciezka z getta* (*Escape from a Ghetto*). Regardless of who (author? translator? editor? publisher?) chose a different title for the American edition, what are the implications of the change from *Escape from a Ghetto* to *Living in Fear on the Aryan Side*?

- 11 The problem of representing the Holocaust through prose fiction (1)
Jerzy Andrzejewski: *Holy Week*

Study questions: (1) Identify Polish reactions to the Nazi extermination of Jews that Andrzejewski’s novella reveals.

(2) What are the broader implications of the recurrent references to Polish suffering under Nazi occupation (see especially pp. 13, 16-17, 38-39, 65-66)?

(3) What is the importance of gender in Holocaust representation?

- 12-13 The problem of representing the Holocaust through prose fiction (2)
Zofia Nalkowska: “The Cemetery Lady,” “By the Railway Track” (handout)

Study questions: (1) “The Cemetery Lady” and “By the Railway Track” are part of Nalkowska’s short story collection entitled *Medallions*. How do you understand the title *Medallions*?

(2) Polemics over the epigraph to *Medallions*: “People dealt this fate to people.” (or, more simply, “People did this to people.”). In an article published in the journal *Res Publica Nowa* in 2002, Henryk Grynberg, a leading Polish Jewish writer, suggests that a more appropriate epigraph would be: “People dealt this fate to Jews.” In a polemical response to Grynberg, the anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (in an article published in *Res Publica Nowa* in 2003) criticizes Grynberg for adopting a Jewish nationalist stance. The literary critic Kinga Dunin (in an article that was published in the journal *Krytyka Polityczna* in 2003 after it was rejected by leading Polish magazines) suggests that a more appropriate epigraph would be: “Poles (in cooperation with Nazis) dealt this fate to Jews.” Ultimately, however, Dunin argues that Nalkowska’s epigraph is crucial because it is eye-opening: “The problem is that Poles murdered human beings. Poles will never become human beings themselves unless they understand this.”

How do you understand the epigraph to *Medallions* and the polemics over the epigraph?

(3) In “By the Railway Track,” identify the person who is the first to find the wounded Jewish woman. Describe that person’s reaction to her.

(4) Who kills the wounded Jewish woman? Why?

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Twelve-week exam: Thursday, 25 April

Format: essay questions.

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Individual appointments (optional) to discuss drafts of the final paper (Tuesday).

A guest lecture by Professor Joanna Michlic (Thursday, 2 May).

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Individual appointments (optional) to discuss drafts of the final paper (Tuesday and Thursday).

Final paper: a formal paper due in my office (1454 Van Hise Hall) on or before Friday, 17 May, 5:00 p.m.

Please note: Only papers submitted in hard copy will be accepted.

There is no final exam in this course.

Final paper

The topic of the final paper is your choice. The paper should engage issues that have been discussed in class, while enabling you to broaden and/or deepen your understanding of these issues.

Your research for the paper should cover both primary and secondary sources. Please be sure to use at least two secondary sources (books and/or articles) and to integrate them into your analysis and interpretation of primary sources.

Your bibliography should list all the primary and secondary sources that you have used. For the bibliography, use a standard format (see MLA, Chicago, or social sciences guidebooks to documenting sources).

The length of the paper should be about 1,800 words. This word count includes a bibliography.

Your paper should have a title and a solid thesis statement. To formulate a thesis, you need to be explicit and precise, for example, “In this paper, I want to test a hypothesis that ...,” or “In this paper, I want to explore the idea that ...,” or “In this paper, I propose to demonstrate that ...,” or “In this paper, I want to argue that ...,” or “In this paper, I will be arguing that”

Your thesis statement should be followed by a sentence introducing your textual evidence, for example, “My analysis and interpretation will focus on Halina Zawadzka’s *Living in Fear on the Aryan Side*, Michal Glowinski’s *The Black Seasons*, and Henryk Grynberg’s *The Victory*,” or “My textual evidence comes primarily from Hanna Krall’s *To Outwit God* and Jerzy Andrzejewski’s *Holy Week*,” or “My discussion will draw on Jerzy Andrzejewski’s *Holy Week* and Halina Zawadzka’s *Living in Fear on the Aryan Side*.”

Remember that your implied reader is someone who needs a step-by-step argument and pertinent evidence (examples, quotations, data, etc.) to follow your analysis and interpretation. It should always be clear what you are proving.

As a general rule, authors of effective papers:

- ** clearly state a thesis (problem, idea, or question) to be investigated
- ** introduce evidence
- ** analyze and interpret the evidence to develop a well-structured argument that will prove or defend the thesis
- ** treat each important point thoroughly before moving on to the next main point
- ** use the conclusion either to recapitulate everything that has gone before in their essay, or to offer the logical culmination of their argument.

The paper should be typed with double spacing. It should have page numbers, correct spelling and grammar, smooth prose, and logical organization.

Reminder: Only papers submitted in hard copy will be accepted.

Introductory lecture

Throughout the course, we will be considering the following topics:

1. What are, in your opinion, widely accepted touchstones of ethical life?
2. Why do we seek to understand the past, even when it is filled with traumas?
3. Writing literary works about the Holocaust:

There are some who doubt whether any work of art or literature about the Holocaust is legitimate (e.g., Theodor Adorno, George Steiner). They argue that there is something wrong, even unethical, in trying to “represent” the Holocaust experience of unspeakable suffering through the aesthetic language and forms characteristic of the artist. They also argue that the aesthetic (artistic) use of language is a betrayal of an ethical responsibility to bear witness to the Holocaust. In other words, they argue that there is something wrong, even unethical, in aestheticizing the Holocaust.

Is there a way out of this problem? Is it possible to represent the Holocaust - a historical event that eludes full comprehension - in literature? And if it possible to represent the Holocaust in literature, how to make sure that literature does not desensitize us to actual scenes of Holocaust violence - scenes in which excessive suffering might be regarded with indifference? How to make sure that literature trains (or retrains) us how to react, that it liberates us into constructive action?

4. Reading literary works about the Holocaust:

Since reading is fueled by an ethics of pleasure, isn't there something fundamentally unethical (perhaps even pornographic) in deriving this pleasure from reading literary works about the Holocaust?

5. Do literary works about the Holocaust have a special ethical obligation to be truthful - that is, faithful to the facts of history? Or is it acceptable to lie in such works?
6. Are memoirs more effective than poetry, prose fiction, and drama as prisms of transmission and understanding of the Holocaust experience? Are poetry, prose fiction, and drama more effective?