Public Humanities (2025), 1, e81, 1–7
doi:10.1017/pub.2025.26

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Stumbling on Sidewalk Stones: Echoes of the Past in Contemporary Warsaw

Rebecca Friedman

Department of History, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA
Email: friedmar@fiu.edu

(Received 06 December 2024; revised 25 February 2025; accepted 27 February 2025)

Abstract

My maternal grandparents were from Warsaw. On one side, only my grandmother survived the Holocaust; on the other, my grandfather and his two brothers escaped together. My sense of family always included those who were lost to genocide. The absence has always been at least as visible as the presence. Ghosts. Shadows. Still images in stories. I knew they were there. Somehow. Somewhere. As of October 2024, these ghosts have a home, a place in the city, in their city of Warsaw, Poland. This was the last place they resided of their own free will. Their names are etched in brass, planted in concrete – stumbling stones or *Stolpersteine*, to be exact – to remind passersby of the last place they lived by choice in Warsaw. This public humanities/public art project reveals a lot about memory, monument, and meaning in a much-contested arena – the history of Jews in Poland.

Keywords: commemoration; Polish-Jewish history; public humanities; public moment

For me, it all started in 1995. Or really in 1968, the year I was born. For many others whose descendants have experienced trauma – way earlier. Likely the dawn of time. I feel the ghosts of my ancestors. Their stories of loss and of death and perseverance are inside of me, following me wherever I go. My family's story always seemed ordinary.

In 1995, I spent the summer in Krakow, Poland, on a graduate student internship at the Institute for Jewish Culture located in the center of Kazimierz, the Jewish sector of the city – then and now. I was mid-way through my history doctorate at the University of Michigan and the opportunity arose. A wealthy man in Hamtramck wanted to support a graduate student to be part of the "Jewish Revival" in Poland in the mid-1990s.[1] They chose me, a student of modern Russia, who had never taken a class in Jewish history (ever) and whose only knowledge was from Russian and Eastern European literature and history. And from her family.

My maternal grandparents were from Warsaw, a city whose population was 30% Jewish before the Second World War. On one side, only my grandmother survived the Holocaust; on

[1] A phenomenon that has been noted by scholars from multiple disciplines is a revival of all things "Jewish" after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. For a broader perspective on this phenomenon, see the following: Lehrer 2010, 2015; Kapralski 2017.

the other, my grandfather and his two brothers escaped together.[2] My sense of family always included those who were lost to genocide. The absence has always been at least as visible as the presence. Ghosts. Shadows. Still images in stories. I knew they were there. Somehow. Somewhere.

Jack and Lola Glazer came from two very different families in pre-war Poland. My grandfather's family was working class and leftist, Bundist-leaning, and my grandmother's family was Orthodox, with her father as a "rabbi" (a term given to many highly religious men).

This family history reflects the complexity of Poland's centuries-old history with its Jewish population. Jews were long part of Polish everyday life, its sense of self, and its historical imaginary. Jews lived on Polish lands – no matter the occupier of those lands – for about 1,000 years before the war. When war broke out 3.3 million (or so) Jews – or approximately 10% of the total population – lived in Poland, more than in any other country in Europe. After the war, it is estimated that about 380,000 Polish Jews were still alive, and most of them never returned to Poland. And among those who did, many fell victim to an antisemitic groundswell in 1968, some say orchestrated by the Communist Party. This history, my family's Polish history, is very much alive. They remain on the streets of Warsaw, if only as ghosts.

This image was taken on October 26, 2024, at Dubois 7, the home of Brandil and Chaim Glezer, each of whom perished in 1944 in the Warsaw Ghetto.

[2] For reading on the fate of Polish Jews, see Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman 2017 and Friedman 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As of October 2024, these ghosts have a home, a place in the city, in their city of Warsaw, Poland. This was the last place they resided of their own free will. Their names are etched in brass, planted in concrete – stumbling stones or *Stolpersteine*, to be exact – to remind passersby of the last place they lived by choice in Warsaw. Our family stones are within the borders of the former Warsaw Ghetto, where many Jewish families long-lived. Half a century or more after they perished in the Jewish Holocaust, they are, in some way, finally back home. Wolf and Sala Frydman, Chaim and Brandil Glezer are again part of the fabric of Warsaw's public life.

This European-wide project, created by artist Gunter Demnig in the 1990s to commemorate victims of the Nazi regime (Jews, homosexuals, Roma and Sinti, and other oppressed groups), is one of a kind and has not been widespread in Poland. There has been much ink spilled over its meaning.[3] Some naysayers object to the fact that people step on the stones, thus defacing the victims one more time, and others insist that there has been enough commemoration of the Jewish Holocaust in Poland and object to the constant reminders in front of contemporary Polish homes. These debates and fiery disagreements are open conversations about history, both national and familial, and about identity itself.[4]

The story in Germany is altogether different. The West German, post-war process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or "coming to terms with the past," is well known. East Germany too began to reckon with its past once the wall came down in 1989, meaning the timing of Gunter Demnig's project was no accident. In 1992, in Cologne Germany, Demnig laid the first *Stolpersteine.* The *Stolpersteine* project raises questions about public art, commemoration, and memory, vis-à-vis massive loss and trauma. The project, Demnig has stated, is a retort to state-commissioned monuments that pepper the landscape of all of Europe; it is considered a "dispersed monument" and meant to become part of the fabric of everyday life, both returning those lost to their homes and reminding present and future city dwellers of those who came before. Each stone is embedded on the sidewalk with a concrete and a brass plate that is four by four inches. They are made from stones found in Germany, Austria, Hungary, and the Netherlands. These stones have brass covers and include the names, years of birth, dates of deportation, and death of each person commemorated. The stones are flush with the ground so that they will be "stumbled upon" each day by a parent strolling their child or a person rushing to the office.[5]

In October 2024, the Frydman and Glezer *Stolpersteine* became the fourth – and first American family's – *Stolpersteine* placed in all of Warsaw. This is a minuscule number, given the statistics in several arenas, from the number of Jews who lived in Poland before the war and again after (approximately 45,000), to the number of stones that have been laid across Europe (over 75,000).[6]

Context matters. In this case, the stones stumbled upon in Berlin or Cologne have differing meanings than they do in Krakow or Warsaw.[7] A monument – like art of all kinds – changes meanings across time and space. Stumbling over a Jewish name in Warsaw is not the same as in Berlin: the story of the war and its trauma holds a

[3] On the *Stolpersteine* project in Berlin, see Harjes 2005.

[4] For a discussion of the politics of shaming in memorialization, see Holzberg 2024.

[5] For a conceptual discussion of the meaning of this memorial (or counter-memorial), see Rachel and Silverman 2013.

[6] Apperly 2019; Zubrzycki 2022.

[7] Smith-Riedel 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contextual narrative space as the reckoning with the trauma of WWII and the Holocaust have manifested differently across nations, from the German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to the Polish long-standing narrative of national martyrdom. In Warsaw, reckoning with the past was interrupted by the long shadow of communism and the contest over victimhood, which led to a post-communist, multifaceted embrace of Jewishness or Philosemitism.

What meaning does the *Stolpersteine* hold in Warsaw, Poland? Commemorative objects and projects are always contested and reimagined with each generation – whether a statue, a wall, or stones on the sidewalk. Their meanings change, just like history itself. Remembrance, commemoration, and their physical manifestations are always personal and individual, even when performed in the community.

The marking of spaces where Jews resided before the war raises deep discomfort within the Polish imagination. The stumbling stones remind everyday Poles, in a visceral and concrete (literally) way, of how much the Second World War changed Polish citizenry and the character of daily life. The question of who is responsible for the murder of Polish Jews is also up for grabs.

When historian Jan Gross published *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* in 2001, an investigative retelling of the murder of Jedwabne's Jews not by the Germans but by their Polish neighbors, a global controversy broke out.[8] The intensity and depth of the discussion only make clear the unresolved historical pressure points very much alive today. Indeed, in 2018, the Polish government issued a law that would criminalize mentioning the complicity of "the Polish nation" in the death of Jews during the Holocaust.

Jews and Jewishness have played a particular role in Poland's imagination for a long time, and increasingly so since the fall of communism in 1989. As Geneviève Zubrzycki articulates in an interview about her book, *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism and Poland's Jewish Revival*:

> Philosemitism, in Poland, is not merely anti-antisemitism, but rather it is related to attempts by progressive Poles to stretch the symbolic boundaries of the nation; to break the equation between Polishness and Catholicism and articulate a more inclusive notion of national identity.[9]

These were precisely my observations in Krakow in the summer of 1996 as I drank kosher wine and ate latkes at the two competing Jewish cafés of the same name – *Ariel.* These cafes were run by Catholic Poles, and the staff was likely mostly Catholic, as so few Jews live in Poland. My recent trip to Krakow confirms that this restaurant still exists in the center of Kazimierz. While the wait staff no longer dresses up "as Jews," the Jewish menu and Chagall on the wall remain. The bookshop nearby has mezuzahs and posters in Yiddish. There is no mistaking this celebration of a Jewish aesthetic that once enlivened the streets of this neighborhood.

[8] Gross 2001.
[9] Tartakowsky 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This image was taken on October 26, 2024, at Niska 9, the home of Sala and Wolf Frydman, each of whom perished in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Perhaps this multivalent and fraught landscape is what made our family trip to Poland and our family's commemoration in Warsaw so poignant. Amidst the more recent phenomenon of the strange embrace of Jewishness and "discovery of ancestry" in the absence of a large Jewish community, and the medium-term history of exclusion and hatred, resides the more distant memory of Poland as a multinational, tolerant space where Jews not only lived, but flourished. It is this distant memory that perhaps has allowed the stumbling stones to expand to Polish spaces, like the streets where my family once lived.

This public humanities and arts project, the brainchild of German artist Demnig, and about 7 years of correspondence with colleagues, politicians, and artists across the Atlantic, brought members of my extended family home to Poland, a place they left behind as the Nazis approached.

This process of commemoration necessitated "an inside man," in this case, an inside woman or two: Anna Gutkowska, the woman who was our "guardian angel" in seeing us through this process, did the research to find out whether and where the stones would be placed, and worked with local historians and cultural preservationists to uncover some details of our family's history.

Over a year before our own commemoration, she wrote to me:

> It was my initiative to place 3 Stolpersteine at Złota, in Warsaw. We did it on 23rd of July (2023), after more than 2.5 years of efforts. But now – the path is settled, and I think it will be easier with the next Stolpersteine.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And she was right. She was the first, we were the fourth, and there are many more in line.

Part of our family's request and subsequent search involved the discovery of the fate of a family member: Fela Frydman, my grandmother Lola's sister. I had never heard of her before. Lola was the lone survivor of the Frydman clan, and only spoke of her youth in two or three often repeated stories, blurry with romance and nostalgia. I had never heard of Felucia or Fela.

Marta Ciesielska – who was brought into the *Stolpersteine* project by Anna – an archivist at the Korczak Archives in Warsaw, changed all of that. She discovered Fela Frydman. Fela was Lola's much younger sister who remained in Warsaw when Lola left. Fela, whose family was either gone, dead, or unable to sustain her, was forced into an orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto that was run by Janusz Korczak, a Jew, born Henryk Goldszmit, who famously went to his own death with "his children" in Treblinka.[10] Felucia's thoughts were recorded in an interview by someone working with Korczak at his orphanage. At our family *Stolpersteine* ceremony, Marta told us that Korczak "did not wish the children to be scared," and so stayed with them, even at his own peril. Fela, Marta said, "was always searching for her family, for her home." And, she said, "She has finally found it." That is the gift of the stumbling stones. We all, I think, felt a newfound connection with the land underneath us as we stood there together in Warsaw. This Frydman/Glezer *Stolpersteine* journey reminds us, as we stumble on the stones, the layered complexities of history, commemoration, and familial, personal narratives.

Image of the author and her three children – Simon Mogul, Joseph Mogul, and Iris Mogul – with her parents, Max Friedman and Ellen Friedman. Ellen Friedman is the granddaughter of those commemorated by the *Stolpersteine*.

[10] For more on Janusz Korczak, see Efron 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Dr. Rebecca Friedman is the Founding Director of the Public Humanities Lab and a Professor of History at Florida International University. Her doctorate was in the history and culture of modern Russia. Her monographs include *Modernity, Domesticity and Temporality in Modern Russia: Time at Home* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and her 2006 book on the history of masculinity in Russia — *Masculinity, Autocracy and the Russian University, 1804–1863*. As a leader in her field, she edited (with Barbara Clements and Dan Healy) Russian Masculinities in History and Culture, which is the first volume in English to focus on the growing field of Russian masculinity studies. She edited (with Markus Thiel), *European Identity and Culture: Narratives of Transnational Belonging* (Routledge, 2012). She is currently co-editing a Cambridge University Press series on *Elements in Soviet and Post-Soviet History*.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: R.F.; Writing – original draft: R.F.

Acknowledgements. I dedicate this essay to my mother, Dr. Ellen G. Friedman, who has always been the keeper of our family's history.

Conflicts of interests. The author declares none.

References

Apperly, Eliza. 2019. "Stumbling Stones: A Different Vision of Remembrance." *The Guardian*, February 18.

Edele, Mark, Shiela Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossman. 2017. *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*. Wayne State University.

Efron, Sara Efrat. 2008. "Moral Education Between Hope and Hopelessness: The Legacy of Janusz Korczak." *Curriculum Inquiry* 38 (1): 39–62.

Friedman, Ellen G. 2017. *The Seven, a Family Holocaust Story*. Wayne State University.

Glenn, Susan A., and Naomi B. Sokoloff, eds. 2010. *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*. University of Washington Press.

Gross, Jan T. 2001. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton University Press.

Harjes, Kirsten. 2005. "Stumbling Stones: Holocaust Memorials, National Identity, and Democratic Inclusion in Berlin." *German Politics & Society* 23 (1): 138–51.

Holzberg, Billy. 2024. "Shame: Public Shaming in the Shadow of Holocaust Guilt." In *Affective Bordering: Race, Deservingness and the Emotional Politics of Migration Control*. Manchester University Press, pp. 97–117.

Kapralski, Slawomir. 2017. "Jews and the Holocaust in Poland's Memoryscapes: An Inquiry into Transcultural Amnesia." In *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception*, edited by Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa. Brill, pp. 170–97.

Lehrer, Erica. 2010. "'Jewish Like an Adjective': Confronting Jewish Identities in Contemporary Poland." In *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*, edited by Susan A. Glenn and Naomi B. Sokoloff. University of Washington Press, pp. 161–87.

Lehrer, Erica. 2015. "Jewish Heritage, Pluralism, and Milieux de Mémoire: The Case of Kraków's Kazimierz." In *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*, edited by Erica Lehrer and Michael Meng. Indiana University Press, pp. 170–92.

Lehrer, Erica, and Michael Meng. 2015. *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*. Indiana University Press.

Rachel, Mary Gould, and Rachel E. Silverman. 2013. "Stumbling upon History: Collective Memory and the Urban Landscape." *GeoJournal* 78 (5): 791–801.

Smith-Riedel, Charleen. 2022. "'Stumbling Stones' in Europe: *A Daughter's Journey to the Smallest of Holocaust Memorials." Library of Congress/American Folklife Center Folklife Magazine*, January 27.

Tartakowsky, Ewa. 2023. "Jewishness and Nationalism: The Polish Kaleidoscope." An Interview with Geneviève Zubrzycki." *K: Jews, Europe, the XXIst Century*, April 20.

Zubrzycki, Geneviève. 2022. *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism and Poland's Jewish Revival*. Princeton University Press.

Cite this article: Friedman, Rebecca. 2025. "Stumbling on Sidewalk Stones: Echoes of the Past in Contemporary Warsaw." *Public Humanities,* 1, e81, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.26