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Reading the Writing on the Wall: A Textual Analysis of Łódź Graffiti

HELENE J. SINNREICH

'Hitler wróć i wykończ Żydów' ('Hitler come back and finish off the Jews')
– on the side of a church-owned building, Łódź, Poland
'Żydzi gaz' ('Jews to the gas chambers')
– on the side of a bakery on ulica Nawrot, Łódź, Poland

One of the most prominent features of Łódź, the second largest metropolitan area in Poland with a population just short of one million people, is the mass of antisemitic graffiti. Swastikas, Jewish stars and anti-Jewish slogans cover the walls of buildings and other structures throughout the city: at the railway station, in underground walkways, in the courtyards and entrance halls of apartment buildings, on cemetery walls, on church properties, and on the sides of public and private buildings. The extensive antisemitic graffiti stretch into the surrounding villages and communities for miles around.

The explanation offered by those embarrassed by the writing on the wall is that there is a battle raging in Łódź between the devoted fans of the two local soccer teams. The war is fought in the streets of the city both literally as well as with spray paint. As in gang warfare, team territory is labelled with graffiti. The graffiti of one team might be defaced or new graffiti might be added to insult the other team. The favourite way of attacking the opposing team is by labelling it as 'Jewish'. This may be accomplished by painting a Jewish star in the name of the opposing team, warping the name of the team into the Polish word for Jew, or painting a swastika or other symbols. The end result is that a city which is home to a university, an art academy, a music conservatory and the most prestigious film school in Poland appears to be seething with antisemitism, filled with hateful graffiti which appear to be directed at Jews. The response offered is that the graffiti are not directed against Jews. Rather, it seems, one of the soccer teams was founded in the interwar period by a Jew; it became associated with Jews and the symbols and slogans aimed at that team are therefore of an antisemitic nature. The inhabitants of Łódź, it is argued, are not antisemitic; in fact, many believe that the hooligans writing the graffiti do not understand the real meaning of the words and symbols they employ in the battle between the soccer teams. Moreover, it is argued, this type of hooliganism is perpetrated by the lowest and basest of Łódź society. This explanation of the antisemitic graffiti in Łódź has been offered in various forms by a variety of individuals from Łódź and abroad. Yet there is something unsatisfactory about the explanation.

Two questions arise. First, how have this language and these symbols come to lose their original meaning for many Łódź residents? Second, is it really possible for this language and these symbols to lose their meaning, or is their use still in fact meaningful? I propose

to undertake a textual analysis of the antisemitic graffiti on the walls of Łódź which takes into consideration the plain text and symbols, the authors, the purpose, the audience and the context of the graffiti.

To begin with, one must examine the plain text and symbols. Antisemitic texts on the walls of the city of Łódź include phrases such as ‘*Żydzi gaz!*’ (‘Jews to the gas chambers!’), ‘*Hitler wróć i wykończ Żydów*’ (‘Hitler come back and finish off the Jews!’), ‘*Jude raus!*’ (‘Jew out!’ (Written in German)), and the transformation of the name of one of the soccer teams into the word Jew; from *Widzew* to *Żydzew*.¹ Anti-Jewish symbols are also incorporated to denigrate the two teams. The symbols depicted include the swastika, the star of David hanging on a gallows, and Jewish stars adorning the name of a team or as a replacement for some of the letters in the name. The plain textual reading of these words and symbols is violent and antisemitic, and at least one of the symbols, that of the swastika, is even a symbol of hatred directed against Poles.

Swastikas came into use in Łódź graffiti as an anti-Jewish symbol in the early postwar period. As Henry Fishel Myłarz, a Łódź resident until the 1950s, testifies, ‘Łódź abounded with graffiti swastikas on most building walls’ (Myłarz, 2002). At that time Myłarz interpreted the graffiti swastikas as anti-Jewish, linking them in his testimony with insults directed at his parents, including ‘Hitler was right’ and ‘Go back to Jerusalem, Jew’ (Myłarz, 2002). The symbol of the Jewish star hanging on a gallows might also have its origins in the Second World War, when the Polish Resistance used graffiti depicting a swastika in a hangman’s noose (Black, 1991). The anti-Jewish version is only a slight alteration of this earlier design. The use of the Jewish star with the name of a soccer team identifies that team as Jewish, and it evokes the forced labelling of Jews with a Jewish star during the war period. In fact, the vast majority of symbols and language used in the Łódź anti-Jewish graffiti are from the Nazi period. ‘*Jude raus!*’ is even in the German language. References to Hitler and sending Jews to the gas chambers also refer directly to the destruction of the European Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War. These words and symbols therefore require a recognition of Second World War language and symbolism for an understanding of their meaning. According to Piotr Goldstein, president of the Jewish student union in Łódź, these symbols and slogans are indeed ‘antisemitic’ (Crust, 2002). What is interesting to explore, however, is his contention that the reasons for drawing and writing them are not antisemitic.

To answer the first question raised above, as to how these symbols and slogans so clearly connected with the Second World War and violence against Jews came to lose their meaning for the residents of Łódź and became connected with soccer hooliganism, one must examine the context in which the graffiti are being created. As we have seen, Łódź soccer fans are the presumed authors of anti-Jewish graffiti in the city of Łódź and its suburbs. Let us take the slogan which reads ‘*Widzew Jews to the gas chambers*’, supplemented with the explanation ‘does not concern friends of Israel’: in this case soccer fans were indeed probably responsible, and it seems that they were soccer fans who were aware of the plain meaning of their graffiti and aware of their potential impact (Szymborski, 2000). They made the effort to indicate that their slogan was not referring to ‘friends of Israel’, by which it is most likely they meant Jews themselves. As we shall see below, the normal word for ‘Jew’ in Polish has a negative connotation, and it seems that in this case the graffiti-writers were attempting to find a more polite term for the Jews (compare the American use of the word ‘Hebrew’ as the polite term for Jew in the early twentieth century). In other instances, however, such as anti-Jewish statements on Jewish communal property or graffiti that do not indicate an affiliation with soccer teams, it is not entirely clear that the authors are soccer fans. The first inscription leaves little doubt that at least *some* of the graffiti authors are aware of the plain meaning of their texts as well

as the potential way in which these texts might be interpreted. This factor must be weighed against the continued explanations offered about the graffiti: that they are the product of soccer rivalry and are not meant to express antisemitic sentiments. The graffiti themselves speak to the possibility that this is not entirely true. There is an awareness on some level that the graffiti have a surface message of hate.

At the same time, although a great deal of the soccer-related graffiti includes racist symbols and phrases, all racist graffiti in Łódź cannot be automatically assumed to be connected with soccer. Through examining the context of the graffiti one can uncover two types of anti-Jewish graffiti. The first are soccer graffiti and second are anti-Jewish graffiti. The two types are, however, interlinked.

The first type of graffiti, the soccer graffiti, have as their primary purpose the marking of territory, similar to gang graffiti. The symbols and words employed to denote territory, in addition to the team names, are derogatory and directed against the opposing team. These derogatory symbols and words are primarily anti-Jewish, including Nazi and racist imagery, and even the simple labelling of the opposing team with the word *Żyd* (Jew) which in the Polish cultural context carries a derogatory connotation.

Hate language and images thus have two meanings: the surface meaning, which the example of a graffiti we cited above was careful to indicate that it was not intending to convey, and the second meaning, in the context of soccer team rivalry. The origin of the secondary meaning of the hate graffiti is a bias within the general European soccer community that has expressed violent racism as part of its general culture in the form of racist actions and slogans in the soccer stadiums of Europe. The racism expressed in the context of the European soccer community has manifested itself in Poland, especially in Łódź, as particularly anti-Jewish. Through their choice of anti-Jewish language and symbolism in territory-marking, Łódź soccer fans are engaged in publicly defining themselves as a community with an antisemitic culture which is part of this wider racist soccer culture. As explained in an article in *The Warsaw Voice*, 'In soccer subculture, fans consider calling their opponents "Jews" offensive, leading to graffiti like "ŁKS Jude" (Szymborski, 2000)².

Evidence for the contention that the Łódź soccer graffiti are to be read in the context of a wider European soccer hooliganism culture is the fact that other racist language has appeared in them. For example, although there is virtually no representation of ethnic minorities in Łódź, graffiti such as '*Whites only!*' and '*Skinheads*' have also made appearances on the city's walls. The appearance of such phrases in the English language reflects the fact that these concepts are borrowed.

The persistence of anti-Jewish imagery and text in the Łódź soccer graffiti stems from a wider acceptance of anti-Jewish sentiment in the surrounding culture. Evidence for this acceptance is that in the Polish language the words used simply to identify someone as a Jew have intrinsic negative connotations. Words such as *Żyd*, which in translation simply mean 'Jew', have negative connotations in Polish. Understanding of a concept expressed verbally or non-verbally 'stems from a common world view or set of understandings which are expressed as the members of the culture interact ...' (Butler, 1996). The inhabitants of Łódź understand 'Jew' as a negative concept because they share a cultural understanding of the concept with those who propagate the subculture of soccer hooliganism. The graffiti of Łódź can thus be read as a reflection of the wider culture. The comprehension by soccer fans and the general public alike in Łódź that '*Żyd*' is a derogatory word in the Polish language indicates a wider context rooted in culture, language and meaning as language develops through consensus (Oliver, 2002). It indicates that the identification of the Jew as the enemy is not marginal in the language; rather it is tolerated and understood by a wider audience. There is a type of Polish antisemitism

which consists of suspecting and accusing those one dislikes of being Jewish or of Jewish origin. As Marek Edelman has put it, 'In this country ... every enemy is a Jew' (Polish, 2002).

This understanding of the word 'Żyd' as having a negative connotation has a historical background in Polish society. It is reinforced through anti-Jewish pamphlets and books sold in kiosks and bookstores, through anti-Jewish propaganda expressed on radio programmes, through anti-Jewish slurs expressed without commentary on television news programmes. It is also subtly reinforced through the propagation of stereotypes about and caricatures of Jews and Jewish culture. The graffiti borrow the deeper meaning of the word 'Żyd', which has evolved from simply identifying a religious group to having a negative connotation, and apply it. The graffiti thus participate in the transformation of the Polish word for Jew into a negative rather than neutral word.

The most interesting phenomenon in connection with the graffiti is the relationship between the graffiti and the audience. Łódź residents become conditioned and desensitised to the antisemitic slogans that overwhelm the landscape. Most of them fail to see the graffiti most of the time; they become blind to them. Not only is the hate language not seen as antisemitic or directed against Jews, or conversely as not antisemitic because it is not directed against actual Jews; it is in fact often simply not seen at all, like so much clutter.

Blindness to the writing on the wall is also encouraged by explanations and rationalisations about how the graffiti appeared. The hate graffiti are so widespread that there is a tendency not to distinguish between those which are the work of soccer team fans marking territory and those which are actually intended to express antisemitic sentiments. Graffiti such as 'Jews to the gas chambers!' are tolerated as connected with the dispute between the two soccer teams rather than being addressed and confronted as hate statements. Anti-Jewish statements on the walls of the buildings of Łódź have thus been transformed into a dialogue between competing soccer fans even when the language is clearly antisemitic and in no way indicates a connection with soccer; such language has become a part of the Łódź landscape which no longer causes alarm and is not even consciously noticed by residents. This dismissal of the graffiti as merely the product of the marginal has been challenged by Jan Karski: 'People in authority in Poland who say that inscriptions on walls like "Jews to the gas chambers" ... are simply the innocent pranks of young hooligans, cannot be regarded as a ruling elite ... If you tolerate it, you favor it and share responsibility' (Szyborski, 2000).

Another interesting aspect of the graffiti and their audience is that Łódź has a Jewish population estimated at between 200 and 400 individuals. Thus the anti-Jewish statements and symbols thrive in a city with a negligible Jewish population – in fact, in a country with a negligible Jewish population of possibly a few thousand among 40 million people. The native Jewish population of Łódź has mixed reactions to the graffiti. Some accept them as part of the landscape, something that has 'always been there'. Others, especially younger members of the Jewish community, express anger and resentment over the use of hate symbolism. Not only native Jews but also visiting Jews, often returning natives, encounter the graffiti. In his account of a visit to his ancestral home of Kańczuga, Robert Bernheim reports the experience of encountering

anti-Semitic graffiti painted on the wall of the building that once was the new synagogue and the Jewish school. A Star of David and the word 'Yids' appeared next to the side entrance. Throughout our journey, we had seen a great deal of anti-Semitic graffiti. The presence of such epithets was an assault on our sensibilities. (Bernheim, 2002)

Here Bernheim, as an outsider, sees antisemitic graffiti. The graffiti he saw on the former Jewish sites were to him clearly not slogans in support of a soccer team but rather expressions of racist sentiment. It is likely that the graffiti he saw were in fact specifically antisemitic because of their location. There are anti-Jewish graffiti on many Jewish sites throughout Poland. Bernheim asks the important question: 'Why do people leave it up? In a town without Jews, what is the purpose of these slurs scrawled for all coming into town to see?' (Bernheim, 2002)

Here is a confrontation both with public tolerance of the graffiti and with the question of who is the intended audience of such graffiti. The phenomenon of anti-Jewish graffiti which are ignored by the general population is not a new one in Poland. Writing between the wars, Edouard de Pomiane, a Pole from France visiting Poland, observed a sign on a church which indicated that dogs were forbidden entry and had been vandalised to include prohibiting entrance to Jews. While intellectual circles did comment on the writing and express disapproval of it, as de Pomiane comments, 'No one has erased it, neither Jew nor Christian' (de Pomiane, 1985, p. 23).

The viewer of the graffiti, the typical Łódź resident, within his or her own cultural context reads all antisemitic graffiti as hooliganism. The specifics of the text are not necessarily seen, examined, analysed or questioned. It often takes the presence of an outsider, a foreigner, a Jew or merely one who inquires to force Łódź residents to see the writing on the wall. One foreigner took action. He wrote an open letter to the main newspaper calling on Łódź residents to do something about the graffiti. The response was a coordinated effort in 2000 to organise a day (named the Day of Tolerance) painting them over. In this case a group of concerned citizens entered into a new type of dialogue with the graffiti producers. They were in effect replying to the graffiti. The direct dialogue with the graffiti writers was the act of painting over the writing on the wall. Hate text was replaced with areas of white paint. The response to this move was revealing. The home of Marek Edelman, a surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and the local synagogue were painted with hate graffiti. This was a clear statement that it was incorrect to regard all the graffiti as simply the territory markings of soccer fans. The myth that all hate graffiti are related to soccer nevertheless persists in Łódź society.

Efforts to clean the buildings of graffiti have had an effect since the inception of the Day of Tolerance in 2000. There is, however, a continuing backlash against the removal of the graffiti. After the 2003 Day of Tolerance in which organised groups painted over offensive hate graffiti and educational workshops on racial and religious tolerance were held, a rash of new graffiti in shiny black paint appeared on the walls of the city. The uniform style of the graffiti, all in the same paint, and the fact that they all went up in one night indicates that they were the result of an organised mobilisation. The new graffiti were particularly virulent in their anti-Jewish sentiment and located in the most prominent parts of the city. The vandalism was so extensive that city workers were put to the task of removing the graffiti from some of the most public thoroughfares. Speculation abounds as to whether the new graffiti were the work of nationalist groups stirred by the forthcoming vote on Poland's accession to the European Union. Perhaps further dialogue on the city walls will shed light on this question..

Notes

¹ Widzew is the nickname of Robotnicze Towarzystwo Sportowe, one of the two soccer teams in Łódź which is located in the Widzew section of Łódź. The other soccer team in Łódź is Łódzki Klub Sportowy.

² ŁKS stands for Łódzki Klub Sportowy (the Łódź Sport Club), one of the Łódź soccer teams.

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