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Barry Falk
In Search of Amnesia
Jewish Narrative in Poland and Ukraine

Texts by Oksana Dovgopolova, Barry Falk
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Windows into history: photographs preserving Holocaust memories and voices lost to time.

In 2017 Barry Falk flew to Krakow to trace his family history. This was the beginning of a five-year photographic project seeking to understand the Jewish narrative in Eastern Europe. With great care, but also with a keen curiosity, he visits the places that were once rich in Jewish culture and talks to the custodians of Jewish memory: the historians, local photographers, archivists, archaeologists and tour guides, to reveals what both remains and is absent.

» *The project grew out of my own personal family history and Jewish roots in Poland and Lithuania. On the 2nd January 2017 I flew to Krakow to begin a research project exploring the Jewish narrative in Poland and Ukraine, an area previously rich in Jewish culture. This was the start of a long term documentary project and begins, almost predictably, in Auschwitz, but then follows a route that shifts and changes, following leads and hunches, ideas and directions, rivers and transportation lines, 'dead ends' and surprising synagogues. It could have been more personal: a return to specific Jewish family roots but genealogy was never my purpose. My interest was in the wider collective memory, specifically how Jewish memory is held in places that suffered atrocity and immense loss.*

The title of this project refers to this state of trauma: amnesia refers to repressed memories, searching for amnesia is akin to the process of being inextricably drawn to this deep sense of loss whilst at the same time unable to fully revisit the site of original trauma. The images I present occupy this psychological space: the push pull between the horror and the wish to rectify history. Though the Holocaust looms large, casting its shadow backwards and forwards, this is not specifically about the Shoah. Within Poland and Ukraine, there is a rich historical narrative of a vibrant Jewish cul-

ture. Poland's & Ukraine's cities, towns and villages once held sizeable Jewish populations active in trade, commerce and politics; the shtetls were a product of Jewish trade promoted and taxed by Polish nobility. Within this narrative is the birth of Hassidism, a spiritual reform of the orthodox tradition, and the rise of Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, an intellectual reform of Jewish tradition. This was destroyed during the Second World War by the German policies and aktions designed to deal with the 'Jewish problem' and clear the way for the German Volk.

Today it is difficult to find traces of these once vibrant communities in the small towns and villages where Jews comprised a large percentage of the population. This project, therefore, seeks to find traces of this narrative through a variety of methods: by seeking remnants of these once vibrant communities in the form of still extant synagogues, often derelict or repurposed; by looking for the physical objects, the relics, stored in museums or sold as tourist trinkets, and by meeting the various custodians of memory: the historians, conservationists, archivists, forensic archeologists, tour guides, artists and academics. As I travelled through this memory rich landscape I kept a journal, written over the course of five years, attempting to make sense of overt and buried memories, past atrocities and contextual history. These journal entries became the text for the final book. « – Barry Falk

Barry Falk is a UK-based photographer documenting psychological themes and sites of collective trauma, particularly in Eastern Europe. He also explores consciousness and sentience through collaborations with research centers. As a member of the MAP6 Photography Collective, he has contributed to projects in Russia, Lithuania, and Finland. His work has been exhibited internationally and featured in the Portrait of Britain 2020.

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Simona Bonanno, press@kehrerverlag.com or
pr.assistance@kehrerverlag.com
 Kehrer Verlag, Mannheimer Str. 175, 69123 Heidelberg, Germany
 Phone +49 (0) 6221 - 649 20-18 – www.kehrerverlag.com

Press images



01_ Judy Josephs and Rose Lipszyc, survivors of the Lublin Ghetto, during the Brama Grodzka Lubliner Reunion. Lublin, Poland, 2017 © Barry Falk



02_ Participants walk to the Umschlagplatz following the route that Jews took out of the ghetto on their way to being deported to the death camps, Lubliner Reunion. Lublin, Poland, 2017 © Barry Falk



03_ Jewish boys at the Jewish school. Bila Tserkva, Ukraine © Barry Falk



04_ Participants walk to the Umschlagplatz following the route that Jews took out of the ghetto on their way to being deported to the death camps, Lubliner Reunion, Lublin, Poland, 2017 © Barry Falk



05_ Valentyna, waitress at the Jewish-themed Mandragora Restaurant. Lublin, Poland © Barry Falk



06_ Oskar Schindler's desk, Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory Museum. Kraków, Poland © Barry Falk



07_ Maksymilian Kolbe, Polonia Wax Museum. Kraków, Poland © Barry Falk



08_ Elderly Jewish man, Holocaust survivor from a village near Zvenyhorodka, Ukraine © Barry Falk



09_ Basement with bust of Lenin, Old Synagogue. Chortkiv, Ukraine © Barry Falk



10_ Disinfection units, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Oświęcim, Poland © Barry Falk



11_ Goods wagon, edge of Białowieża Forest, Poland © Barry Falk



12_ Caravan, outskirts of Treblinka, Poland © Barry Falk