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Poland's hateful graffiti

Writing on the wall

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IN 2014 Evan Alberhasky travelled to Poland from Jerusalem to learn about his Jewish ancestral roots. In the taxi to the city of Krakow, he was greeted by graffiti declaring *Anty Jude* (“Anti Jews”). He saw crossed-out Jewish stars and the words *Żydzi do gazu* (“Jews to the gas”) sprayed on the side of a building. Then he came across something more perplexing: graffiti reading *Jude Gang* (“Jewish Gang”). Like many visitors, Mr Alberhasky was startled by what he saw as blatant anti-Semitism.

“It’s quite difficult for foreigners to understand the graffiti, especially when they’re on their way to [visiting] Auschwitz,” says Rafał Pankowski, a professor at Collegium Civitas and a co-founder of an anti-racist NGO called *Nigdy Więcej* (Never Again). Yet most locals don’t see the graffiti as hate speech, he explains. Rather, they classify it as a relatively benign byproduct of something else: football hooliganism.

In 1906 two new football clubs, Cracovia and Wisła, made Krakow their home. Such proximity bred a fierce, violent rivalry that persists to this day. Cracovia historically welcomed Jewish players, and came to identify itself—with or without Jews—as “Jude Gang”. Wisła responded by adopting “*Anty Jude*” as its slogan. This tussle came to be known as *Święta Wojna*, or “Holy War”, though it wasn’t until after after the fall of communism, when Poles were able to speak freely for the first time in decades, that fans resorted to stadium chants, logos and graffiti.

The BBC documentary “Stadiums of Hate” took Poland and Ukraine to task for their antagonistic sports culture just before the Euro 2012 championships. Racist chants and stadium attacks were presented as evidence of dysfunctional social norms. But many Poles accused the BBC of sensationalist, biased reporting. “I am furious at the way the BBC has exploited me as a source,” complained Jonathan Ornstein, executive director of Krakow’s Jewish Community Centre (JCC), in a letter to *The Economist* after he was featured in the BBC broadcast. While he does not endorse the graffiti, Mr Ornstein says the football fans are not attacking Poland’s Jews. The seven-year-old JCC and surrounding religious buildings have never been targeted by graffiti or violence.

Some wonder if the semi-invisibility of Poland’s hateful graffiti is a problem. News articles and organisations have addressed graffiti in the past, and in some cases fans have been banned or fined for hate speech targeting black players or for banners or chants with anti-Semitic language. But the issue is suddenly getting more attention after attacks on Jews around Europe earlier this year, and in the run up to parliamentary elections later this month. In September the prime minister, Ewa Kopacz, joined *Hejtstop* (Stop Hate), an activist group, to paint over anti-Semitic slogans. The European Union-funded group *Zmaluj to!(*Paint it over!) has been organising similar events. Ms Kopacz’s EU-friendly party *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform) seems eager to distinguish itself as progressive, tolerant and multicultural. Despite recent anti-refugee demonstrations, she has declared that the country would take in more migrants as a gesture of “European solidarity”.

A new artwork in Warsaw’s dense Muranów neighbourhood, on the site of the former Jewish ghetto, further aims to spur discussion and debate. Hubert Czerepok’s 15-metre*Płot nienawiści* (“The Fence of Hatred”), created during a residency at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, is a welded steel

fence featuring abstract, overlapping xenophobic phrases (such as *Polska dla Polaków,* “Poland for Poles”, a slogan commonly used in anti-refugee campaigns), which viewers must scrutinise closely to decipher. Mr Czerepok says he was motivated to create the piece after noticing that hateful graffiti had become “part of the urban landscape” in Poland. He was surprised by how impervious locals were in the face of these slurs—how easy it was for people to relegate such graffiti to the bravado and bad behaviour of football fandom.

Mr Czerepok had hoped his piece would spark debate, but he was surprised by the speed of the response. Within a day of the fence’s debut in September, it was anonymously covered with a sign reading *Precz z tą hucpą* (“Away with that chutzpah”, using the Yiddish term for audacity), which has since been removed. Some have complained that the fence unfairly characterises Poland as xenophobic; others say it is too close to nearby playgrounds. A show of Wojtek Wilczyk’s photographs of Poland’s “Holy War” graffiti, opening at POLIN in Warsaw on October 23rd, also seems designed to rouse Poles to confront these insults.

Mr Pankowski believes attitudes towards the graffiti are starting to evolve. He is pushing for a national strategy to address the slurs, and says it is time for the Polish Football Association to get involved. The group needs to stop “turning a blind eye to the political manipulation of extremist groups,” he argues. Though it is wrong to assume the graffiti is evidence of a violent vein of hatred in the country, it is similarly wrong to dismiss it all as no more than writing on the wall.

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