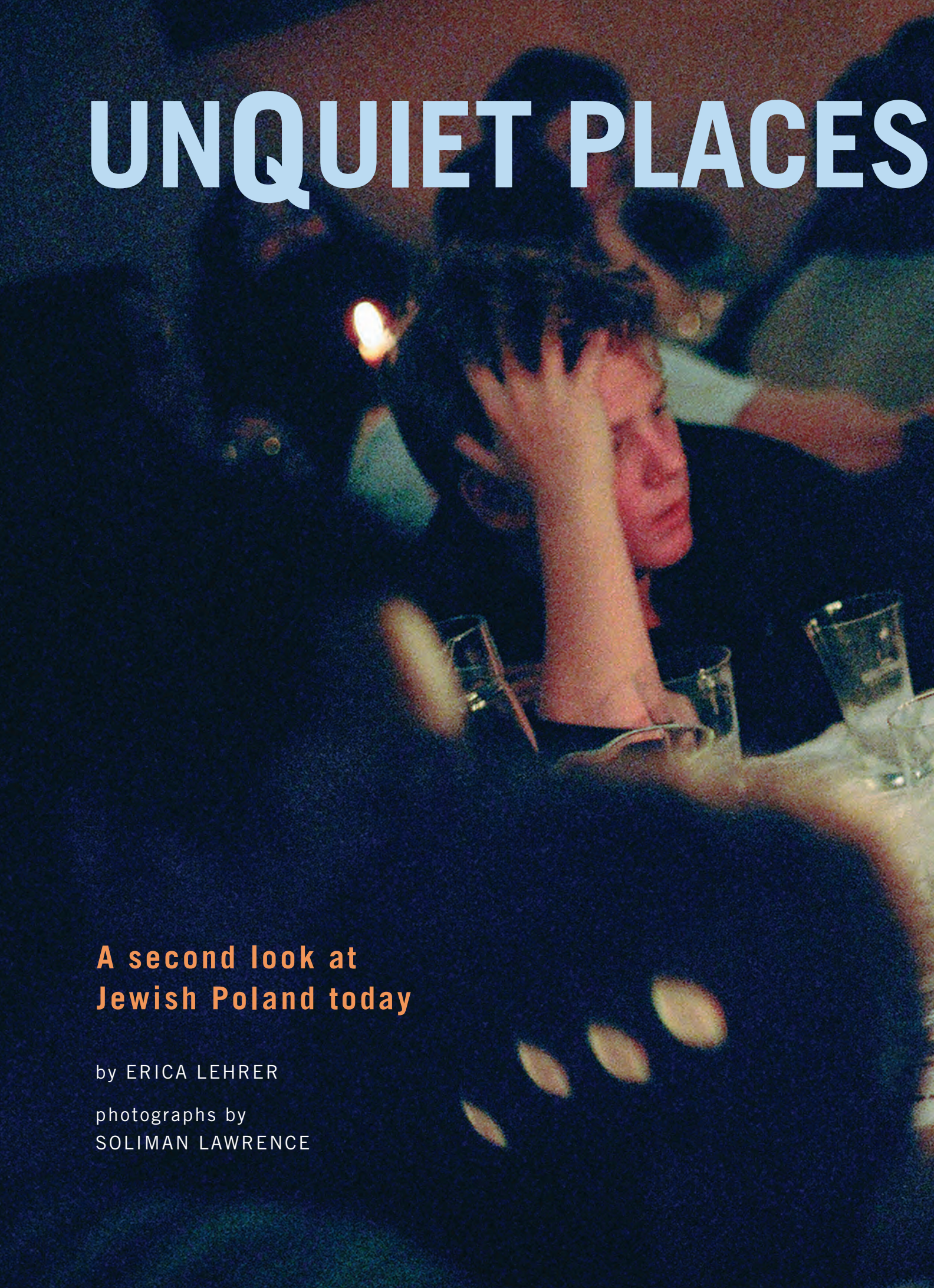

UNQUIET PLACES

A second look at Jewish Poland today

by ERICA LEHRER

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ASK JEWISH TRAVELERS TO POLAND what they expect to find there – indeed, what they may even hope to see. The answers are typically negative: lost worlds, abandoned places, empty spaces. Ruins, fragments, shadows, echoes. These are visitors' instinctual associations with a country where millions of Jews perished.

But those seeking an encounter with the past increasingly come face to face with the preoccupations of the present. As local and foreign interests in Polish Jewish history meet and mingle, absence itself – in its familiar forms of ignorance, silence, and neglect – is disappearing. The Holocaust may seem an end to history, an everlasting void, a permanent desecration of terrain. And yet life goes on.

And the images of hat-wearing visitors clustered in the Remu shul – they could belong as easily to a prewar moment as to the present.

This process is particularly evident in Kazimierz, the historically Jewish quarter of Krakow, Poland. In the space of a few city blocks, one can see local entrepreneurs, culture brokers, public intellectuals, and various fellow travelers who have taken as their task the perpetuation of Jewish heritage – even if most entered the avocation with little or no experience of Jewish people.

This "return to life" stands in opposition to the kind of willful, nefarious erasure of Jewish heritage one finds elsewhere, where crumbling, razed, or simply unmarked once-Jewish places have fallen victim to powerful nationalist projects. Such is the case in the Ukraine, where major obstacles hinder attempts to recall the Jewish past. In Poland, on the contrary, new relations among East and West, Jew and Christian and Pole, and the intertwining of rebirth and demise, memory and commerce, mourning and discovery increasingly keep Jewish sites awake and alive.

These photographs ask us to take a second look at Jewish Poland today, their unusual compositions compelling us to inquire where we otherwise might assume. Well-worn sights are revealed anew, suggesting historic changes without masking the disquieting, often ironic resonances that accompany them.

MANY JEWS EXPRESS understandable ambivalence on encountering a celebration when they were anticipating a cemetery. As one young Jewish tourist told me, "I don't like all this business. I don't think a Jewish concert is good for anyone. I want to see the synagogue in ruins. I have to see the ruins because that's what I can find here – ruins of a culture. I just don't like to have so much life here." But Jews are not the only ones coming to terms with this past. Already in 1994 the non-Jewish owner of one of Kazimierz's Jewish cafés said to me, "One year ago tourists who came here could see only death. Now, with Café Ariel, they see life."

If Kazimierz has a Disney-like veneer, its cafés, shops, and hotels replete with faux-Hebrew lettering, *Schindler's List* tours, and a towering menorah, it also has hidden depths. The keepers of Jewish memory here, of Jewish culture, are – perhaps surprisingly – usually not Jewish. This can lead newcomers to confusion, and sometimes resentment. In most other countries in the world, if you see Hebrew or Yiddish writing on a shop sign, you know whom you'll find inside. But here symbols and spaces of Jewishness have been inherited by default. They have been renewed largely by non-Jews, some of whom have grown into their new roles as keepers of memory with a sense of profound obligation.

PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE "VANISHED WORLD" of East European Jewry have been preoccupied with absence. Black-and-white film, in particular, keeps the present at bay, allowing us to imagine that time has stopped in whole swaths of Europe. Pictures of abandoned cemeteries and collapsing synagogues are also accusations, maintaining the sense that local people don't care. But such images – while real – can also cloud our vision. Their limited framings blind us with complacent familiarity, drowning out questions precisely where questions are most needed.

Perhaps we rely too much on seeing. Making the effort to get beyond surfaces – our own and others' – and taking time to inquire and listen to and digest unexpected answers, can reframe stock images. Take a common Kazimierz object, for sale on the street or in shops: a miniature wooden Jew,

painted to resemble a doll-like zeyde or pious rabbi. We might easily relate to a Jewish tourist's comment: "It's just sick! These people are dead, were killed! And you want to buy a little statuette?" But take another Jewish visitor, drawn to them as "a symbol, just sitting there, that Judaism would never die no matter what happened. No matter how many times you try to put the Jews down, they pop up somewhere." Finally, what of the Polish Catholic craftsman, who said, "I make these woodcarvings in honor of their memory… it is my aim not to let the traces of this ancient culture sink into oblivion"? Amidst these voices, a kitschy souvenir becomes much more.

In Kazimierz, life faces death, presence accompanies absence, then is embraced by now, because some people do care. Many Poles find in Jewishness an activist project, a way to bear witness to unspoken losses, a possibility for a better future. And many visiting Jews seek reconnections to a milieu long cut off by post-Holocaust pain and Communist realities. Here curiosity, engagement, and pleasure confront, and perhaps prevail over, the threat of amnesia. Such developments demand a new visual language. Barbed wire, abandoned cemeteries, anti-Jewish graffiti – even the shining faces of a new generation of Jews – do not tell the whole story. News of the rebirth of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, for example, rarely reveals the extent to which such communities may mingle with, respond to, or even depend on the support of interested local non-Jews, foreign tourism, or both.

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A crowd of spectators at the final concert of an annual Jewish cultural festival recalls both a ghetto and a familiar scene of camp liberation. The modern-day fiddler on the roof breathes life into a cultural icon, the halo of light and genuflecting acolyte beside him suggesting a new interplay of traditions. The young people in the klezmer café with their drinks, caresses, cell phone, and miniature fiddling Jew…are they Polish or Israeli? Are the smiling girls with the prayer book, menorah, and tallis-wrapped friend Jews? Is the woman in the overgrown cemetery cleaning or scavenging? Do the tourists resting on the synagogue-museum pews as they plan their next excursion see themselves as others might – lost among tombstones? And the images of hat-wearing visitors clustered in the Remu shul – they could belong as easily to a pre-war moment as to the present.

These images raise profound questions about what will remain with the passage of time, who will own these traces, to what ends they will be put. How will those of us who come ever further "after" see, feel, connect to this past? The embrace of things Jewish in Poland is a fashion. But it is not only that. As non-Jewish Lucyna Les of the Jarden Jewish bookshop asked, "What's the matter who's doing this? To keep tradition, to try to save the memory of the people who lived here for 600 years. That's part of Polish history. Everybody who can do it should do it." ♦

Soliman Lawrence is a photographer living in Berlin. Erica Lehrer teaches in the history department at Concordia University in Montreal. They are working together on a book, Unquiet Places: Jewish Heritage in Eastern Europe Today. *View more photographs at www.lightstalkers.org/soliman_lawrence/.*