

# Trauma and Memory

Four-monthly European Review of Psychoanalysis and Social Science

2025, Volume 13, Number 2 (August)

ISSN 2282-0043

www.eupsycho.com – email <redazione@eupsycho.com>

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# Memory and Trauma in the History of the Ancient Etruscan City of Veii: Examples from Historical and Archaeological Sources

Ugo Fusco\*

**Abstract.** The Etruscan city of Veii was one of the most prominent and powerful centres in southern Etruria. This article explores the themes of memory and trauma in relation to the settlement's history by examining a selection of episodes and archaeological contexts. The concept of memory is linked to the funerary cult of a male figure associated with the mythical Halesus, son of Neptune and ancestor of the kings of Veii, dating to the site's earliest phase of occupation (9<sup>th</sup> century BCE). In contrast, trauma is associated with the city's dramatic downfall following its conquest by Rome (early 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE).

**Keywords:** Veii, founder cult, memory, Roman conquest, trauma.

**Riassunto.** Memoria e trauma nella storia dell'antica città etrusca di Veio: esempi dalle fonti storiche e archeologiche. La città etrusca di Veio è stata uno dei centri più famosi e potenti dell'Etruria meridionale. Per descrivere il tema della memoria e del trauma, in relazione alla storia dell'insediamento, sono stati scelti alcuni episodi e contesti archeologici: la memoria è collegata al culto funerario di un personaggio maschile, identificato con la figura mitica Halesus, figlio di Nettuno e antenato dei veienti, pertinente alla fase iniziale (IX secolo a.C.) di frequentazione del sito; il trauma, invece, è posto in relazione alla drammatica fine della città a causa della conquista romana (inizio IV sec. a.C.).

**Parole chiave:** Veio, culto del fondatore, memoria, conquista romana, trauma.

## Introduction

This study examines selected episodes and archaeological contexts that best illustrate the themes of memory and trauma within the long and complex history of the ancient and renowned Etruscan city of Veii (see Ward-Perkins 1961, which remains a fundamental reference, and Tabolli 2019 for a recent and updated overview). In particular, it examines two crucial moments in the life of the settlement: its earliest phase (10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and its tragic end (early 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), marking the close of Etruscan occupation following the violent Roman conquest. Given the large amount of material available for this investigation, a selective approach has been adopted, evaluating both the quantity and quality of the data. Following a brief topographical overview of the site, the study is divided into three sections. The first two focus on analysing the available documents relating to the selected episodes concerning Memory and Trauma, while the third offers some concluding reflections. It is worth noting that, although these episodes serve as exemplary models for the two themes, they are not directly connected to one another, given the long chronological gap that separates them. Nevertheless, they may be seen metaphorically as “pearls” on the same “string of a necklace”: episodes (the pearls) relating to the long history (the string) of a single site (the necklace).

The data are presented following the standard methodology of historical-archaeological research, which separates the sequence of information drawn from historical sources from that of

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archaeological sources, concluding with a comparative discussion in which interpretative hypotheses are clearly and explicitly defined. In presenting the archaeological data, the discipline's descriptive criteria have been retained to highlight the boundaries between the evidence itself and its interpretation. The bibliography has been limited to the most relevant and recent works to avoid overburdening the text with lengthy citations that add little to the discussion.

## **The City of Veii: A Topographic Overview**

The site under discussion lies approximately 10 kilometres north of Rome, on a tuff plateau (covering 185 hectares). It is bordered by two still-active watercourses: the Valchetta stream, the ancient Cremera, and the Piordo brook. Geologically, the area falls within the Sabatine volcanic complex, which forms part of the Roman magmatic province, along with the Vulsini, Cimini, Vico and Alban Hills. The plateau has an irregular perimeter and sheer rock faces, with drops of up to 30 metres. Two toponyms are particularly relevant to this study. The first, Piazza d'Armi, refers to a portion of land slightly detached from the main urban plateau—a sort of southern outcrop—and is considered by scholars to be the site of Veii's first acropolis (see most recently Bartoloni 2022 and Piergrossi 2022). The second, Piano di Comunità, lies at the centre of the urban plateau and is considered the site of the urban acropolis from at least the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, following Piazza d'Armi's political decline and abandonment. This area is also thought to have housed the temple of *Juno Regina*, the city's tutelary deity and mentioned by the historian Livy (Bartoloni 2021b, p. 297; Benedettini 2024, 103-105). The site's original orographic configuration is thought to have been much more rugged and uneven than it appears today, with significant differences in elevation, gradually smoothed out over time by continuous agricultural activity. Unlike nearby sites such as Cerveteri, the plateau is now largely devoid of buildings, aside from a few rural structures, and is extensively cultivated.

### **Section One**

#### **Memory and the Birth of the Urban Settlement**

Two examples are analysed in connection with the first theme, both well known in the archaeological literature and possibly linked to one another. They relate to the Veientine settlement's earliest phases of life, which, according to the most recent research, emerged around the end of the Bronze Age (Final Bronze 3B: late 11<sup>th</sup>–early 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE). This followed the abandonment of small Bronze Age villages scattered across the territory and the concentration of the population on the expansive tuff plateau, resulting in the formation of a unified settlement for the first time (see most recently di Gennaro 2024).

The discussion begins with a Latin literary source that mentions an ancestor of the kings of Veii, and then briefly outlines the archaeological phases connected to an unusual urban burial known as the “funerary chapel”. This context features the interment of a male figure who was the focus of sustained ritual activity over a prolonged period. The archaeologists who uncovered the site interpreted him as the most charismatic figure of the Veientine settlement's earliest phase.

#### ***Halesus* and the Kings of Veii**

In a passage by Servius - a Latin philologist active in the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE - the origins of the *Salii* priesthood are discussed alongside the genealogy of Veii's royal house. The king named *Morrius*, who is not otherwise attested in the Latin tradition (for known names of Veientine kings,

see Bartoloni 2021, p. 301), is said to have had *Halesus*, son of the god *Neptunus*, as an ancestor (SERV. *ad Aen.* 8. 285: ... *quidam etiam dicunt salios a Morrio, rege Veientanorum, institutos, ut Halesus, Neptuni filius, eorum carmine laudaretur, qui eiusdem regis familiae auctor ultimus fuit*; for commentary on the passage, see Graf 2006 and Piergrossi 2019, 55, with earlier bibliography). *Halesus* is also mentioned in other literary sources in connection with the site of *Falerii (Veteres)*, a settlement roughly 30 km north of Veii, where he is considered the city's founder (Biella, Michetti 2018, 444). The association of this same figure with both settlements (Veii and *Falerii*) has been interpreted by scholars as an allusion to ancient political ties between the two cities (Piergrossi 2022, 153; for the hypothesis that *Halesus*'s cult site was located near the sanctuary of *Iuno Curitis* at Celle, in the peri-urban area of *Falerii*, see the recent overview in Biella, Michetti 2018, 444–447, and Bernard 2023, 150–151). Moreover, the Servius passage establishes a direct connection between the Veientine kings (beginning with *Morrius*) and the god *Neptunus* (*Nethuns* in Etruscan), via the figure of *Halesus*. But why Neptune specifically in relation to the kings of Veii? The origin of Neptune in the Latin-Italic world, particularly Umbria, and his later adoption by the Etruscans is well documented in scholarly literature (Arnaldi 1997, 5–17; de Grummond 2006, 144–145; Trafficante 2009, 169–172). More is known about Neptune on the Latin side, where he was originally a chthonic and subterranean deity associated with inland waters, marshes, stagnant pools, lagoons and thermal mineral springs. Only later did he become identified with the Greek sea god Poseidon. Although his cult is attested in various sources (such as the Liver of Piacenza and the *Liber Linteus Zagrabienensis*), it was not especially widespread in Etruria, and, in fact, is entirely absent in the territorial context examined here for the Etruscan period (Trafficante 2009; Giontella 2012, 163). Veii and its surrounding area are characterised by abundant water resources (rivers, potable springs and thermal waters) as well as direct access to the sea, where the well-known salt pans were once located. These were originally under Etruscan control and later passed onto the Romans (see most recently Fusco in press). In addition, the sources describe another episode that occurred during the Roman siege of Veii: the rising and overflowing of Lake Albano, located outside Veii's sphere of influence but closely linked to the city's conquest (for a full collection and analysis of sources, see D'Arco 1997). Some scholars have suggested that Neptune's presence was indirectly linked to this natural phenomenon, which Roman sources attributed to religious transgressions during the *feriae Latinae*, the festival of Juppiter Latiaris (see most recently Fusco in press with earlier bibliography). Finally, a recent discovery in the area of the ancient salt pans revealed an Imperial-era inscription (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) referring to a cult dedicated to the god Neptune (Cébeillac-Gervasoni 2016). As this brief overview shows, all references to the god derive from Roman sources or date to the Roman period, long after the fall of Veii (early 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE). One may therefore question whether the account given by the late Roman source (Servius) reflects genuine Veientine beliefs, or whether it is instead a Roman reworking or *pastiche* of earlier mythical traditions. If this hypothesis is valid, the figure of *Neptunus* may have served merely as a way to condense and represent a more complex mythological framework originally composed of multiple Etruscan mythological figures, whose individual names have since been lost over time (Fusco in press; on Etruscan water deities, see Giontella 2012).

### **The Archaeological Sequence of the “Funerary Chapel” at Piazza d’Armi**

This section analyses the archaeological context of the so-called “funerary chapel”, which dates to the earliest phases of the Veientine settlement, along with the principal structures associated with it. The structure in question, located in the central area of the north-western zone of Piazza d’Armi, consists of an inhumation tomb dug into the natural geological layer. It was enclosed within a larger structure, originally built from perishable materials and subsequently rebuilt and modified over the course of approximately four centuries, eventually incorporating tuff blocks (from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Several aspects of the discovery stand out as particularly distinctive and exceptional: its orientation, the location of the tomb within a residential area, and the use of

inhumation rather than the more widespread cremation ritual (Bartoloni 2021a, 287–288; Piergrosi 2022, 159). The archaeological evidence spans from Period I (PF1-2; Veii IA-IIB: 9<sup>th</sup>–mid/late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) to Period IV (Archaic Period: late 6<sup>th</sup>–early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) in the chronological sequence of the Piazza d’Armi site. As the final excavation results were only published recently (Bartoloni, Neri, Pitzalis 2021), this description is limited to the essential information and is organised by construction phase:

- Phase 1a, PF1 (Veii IA-IB): 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Structure M was built directly on the geological layer, traces of which remain in the form of postholes outlining its perimeter. It has been reconstructed as an elliptical hut (dimensions: 11 x 4.75 m; orientation: north-west/south-east; area: 37.71 m<sup>2</sup>; single entrance on the north-west side) with clay walls mixed with vegetable materials and supported by an internal wooden framework. The interior was divided into two rooms, with the inner one containing an apsidal pit tomb (dimensions: 2 x 0.50/0.60 m; depth: 0.80 m) holding the bones of a man aged 30–40, buried without any grave goods. The presence of six small postholes around the grave suggests the presence of a miniature hut, possibly also apsidal, constructed to cover the tomb itself (Neri 2021a, 36–37; 2021b, 251; Neri, Pitzalis 2021).

- Phase 1b, PF1-2 (Veii IC-IIB): late 9<sup>th</sup>–mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. A short distance from Structure M lies Pit B, oval in shape (width: 3 m; depth: 0.80 m). It contained numerous traces of fire used for burning animal and plant offerings and was involved in various depositional rituals. The structure is interpreted as an altar-pit, dedicated to a chthonic female deity such as Ops or Demeter/Veii, and used for ceremonies honouring the deceased buried in Structure M. Adjacent to Pit B, the smaller Pit O was built—a shaft featuring a ledge designed to hold a stone covering. It is interpreted as a votive pit for depositing plant offerings and liquids for propitiatory purposes and can be likened to the concept of the *mundus* found in Rome (Neri 2021a, 38–41; 2021b, 252–256; Neri, Pitzalis 2021).

- Phase 1c, PF2 (Veii IIB): mid/late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Almost adjacent to Pit B is Pit A, which is bilobed in shape (depth: 0,30 m). The area connecting the two lobes features another pit, containing the remains of a young individual (aged 15–17). The burial appears to have been both preceded and followed by ritual acts involving fire and animal sacrifice (sheep/goats, pig, dog, roe deer). Like Pit B, Pit A is interpreted as an altar-pit associated with Structure M. At the end of this phase, Structure M was decommissioned and stripped, and Pits B and O were sealed, although ritual activity continued through to Phase 3b (Neri 2021a, 42–47; 2021b, 257–258; Neri, Pitzalis 2021).

- Phase 2a, PF2 (Veii IIC): c. late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Structure M was replaced by a new rectangular building, labelled H, featuring two porticoed areas at its short ends. Its foundations consisted of shallow trenches dug into the geological layer with internal postholes (dimensions: 19.90 x 5.50 m; orientation: north-west–south-east; area: approx. 80 m<sup>2</sup>; two possible entrances: one with double doors on the north-west short side and another on the south-west long side). The walls, no longer preserved, were made of compacted clay supported by a wooden framework. As before, the interior was likely divided into two rooms, with the inner one once again housing the tomb from Phase 1a. Almost adjacent to the south side of Structure H, another large building labelled G was constructed using the same techniques. Reconstructed as comprising five side-by-side rooms (dimensions: 24 x 7 m; orientation: north-east/south-west; area: 168 m<sup>2</sup>), its central room was wider than the side chambers, which were symmetrically arranged. This building is interpreted as a grand aristocratic or royal residence with a reception hall for political and religious functions—comparable to the *Regia* in Rome—and closely associated with the neighbouring cult Structure H (Neri 2021a, 69–73; 2021b, 259–262; Neri, Pitzalis 2021; Bartoloni 2022).

- Phase 2c, Late Orientalising (Veii IV): late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Structures H and G were decommissioned and dismantled (Neri 2021a, 75–80).

- Phase 3b, Late Orientalising (Veii IV): late 7<sup>th</sup>–early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE (ca. 600 BCE). This phase marks a major technological development: the use of tuff blocks for foundations, with elevations made of compacted earth and roofs covered with flat and curved clay tiles (often decorated with sculptural elements on the pediment). Ritual activities connected to Pits A, B and O came to an end, and the new Structure E was built on the site of the former Structure H. Part of its tuff-block

foundations remain partially preserved due to later spoliation. Like its predecessor, the new building had a rectangular layout (dimensions: 12 x 6 m; orientation: north-west/south-east; area: 72 m<sup>2</sup>), with a portico on its short side, possibly *in antis*. As in previous phases, the interior appears to have been divided into two rooms (one approximately 45 m<sup>2</sup>, the other 15 m<sup>2</sup>). Adjacent to the external north-east wall, a small square structure labelled F (3 m per side) was built, interpreted as an *ante*-type altar. It is associated with the rituals previously carried out at Pit B and linked to Structure E. Very close by, another new structure labelled D was erected with a different layout than the earlier phase (building G): three rooms aligned on an axis, forming a T-shape (dimensions: 20 x 8 m; area: 45 m<sup>2</sup>), with a continuous portico on three sides. As in earlier phases, this new building likely served a dual function: as a *regia* for community political-religious gatherings and as a residential space. Also in this phase, to the north-east of Structure D, the so-called *Oikos* of Stefani, was built. It had a rectangular floor plan and tuff-block foundations (dimensions: 15.35 x 8.07 m; orientation: north-west/south-east; area: 123.87 m<sup>2</sup>; single entrance on the north-west short side). Although its exact function remains uncertain (Potts 2015, 133–134), it is generally considered to have belonged to the sacred sphere and is now interpreted as the *curia* of the site—a meeting place for the men of Piazza d’Armi to hold communal ceremonies in honour of the ancestor buried in Structure E (Pitzalis 2021a, 98–101; 2021b, 263–267; Neri, Pitzalis 2021, 272; Bartoloni 2021b, 305).

- Phase 3d, Archaic Period: c. mid-6<sup>th</sup> century BCE – Structures E and D were dismantled and razed (Pitzalis 2021a, 103–106).

- Phase 4a, Archaic Period: late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE – A new structure, labelled C, was constructed (dimensions: 12 x 5 m; orientation: north-west/south-east; it likely preserved the two original entrances seen in Structure E, with an additional new entrance added on the southern short wall). Structurally and in layout, it retained the same general features as Structure E: tuff-block foundations and a short rear portico. Portions of the beaten-earth flooring were preserved inside and outside the structure. In the second inner room, directly above the original tomb from Phase 1a, a small installation was built, consisting of a tuff block and several associated layers. This feature is interpreted as an altar for rituals linked to the deceased’s funerary cult. Structure N replaced Structure D, though it is poorly preserved and is interpreted as a minimal structure defining an open area (Pitzalis 2021a, 128–130; 2021b, 268–269; Neri, Pitzalis 2021).

- Phase 4e, Late Archaic Period: late 6<sup>th</sup>–early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Structures C and N were dismantled (Pitzalis 2021a, 131–132).

## Reflections on the Theme of Memory

The preceding paragraphs examined the theme of memory through a range of (historical and archaeological) sources, which ultimately converge on the notion of collective memory and identity in the Etruscan community of Veii. The first case draws on a late Roman literary source (Servius), who refers to *Halesus*, the son of *Neptunus*. *Halesus* was an ancestor of the Veientine king *Morrius* and his lineage (and, by extension, the broader community), and is a mythological figure not associated with a defined historical period. However, analysis of the source has revealed its interpretative limitations, particularly regarding the genealogical link between the Veientine community and the god *Neptunus-Nethuns*, which remains highly uncertain due to the lack of archaeological evidence. The central issue in reconstructing the beliefs of the Veientine community about its past concerns the absence of original historical and literary sources: what remains is exclusively filtered through the Roman perspective. The second case, by contrast, examined a fully intact archaeological site at Piazza d’Armi in Veii. It offers compelling evidence for the continuity of rites associated with a funerary cult honouring an anonymous male figure, spanning from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The various finds mentioned (the funerary cult buildings: M, H, E, C; the altar-pits: B and A; the ritual pit O, the *ante*-type altar F; and the adjacent aristocratic residences used for political-religious and residential functions: G and D) indicate that this individual

must have held a particularly prestigious role in life and an exceptional status in death. He may have functioned as a common ancestor, either for the segment of the population residing at Piazza d'Armi, or for the urban community of Veii as a whole (Bartoloni 2021a; Bartoloni 2022; Piergrossi 2022; for a different interpretation, see M. Torelli, who considers the archaeological remains to relate to a *bidental*, i.e. the burial site of a man struck by lightning: Torelli 2007-2008). Naturally, all cultic activities would have taken place under the authority of a gentilitial group, as indicated by the imposing residential structures, which were able to consolidate and perpetuate its power and prestige (Bartoloni 2022). It is no coincidence, then, that some scholars have linked *Halesus* and the anonymous deceased male, suggesting that they may represent the same figure (Biella, Michetti 2018; Bartoloni 2021a), although this suggestion remains purely hypothetical and speculative. Taken as a whole, the funerary and cultic archaeological context at Piazza d'Armi is considered a genuine reflection of the beliefs of the Veientine community, and thus part of its cultural memory: the shared body of knowledge about the community's past, its historical origins and later developments, through which individual identity and collective unity were shaped and sustained (Holscher 2018, 95–149; on cultural memory, see Assmann 1997 and the recent overview in Bettini 2022, 41–58). As such, the tomb and the structures built to protect, preserve and commemorate it act as a landmark in the construction of collective memory (Acconcia 2024, 161; on *lieux de mémoire*, see Nora 1984–93) and can be understood as a chronotope (Bettini 2022, 53) or mnemotope (Ferri 2022, 22–27), i.e. a foundational element in the process of *topopoiesis* (Ferri 2022, 23) within the cultic landscape of Veii. The theme of cultural memory has been thoroughly explored in Roman archaeology, particularly with regard to Rome itself (e.g. Galinsky, Lapatin 2015; Smith 2015; Cifani 2018; for the Greek world: Boardman 2004). In recent years, it has also been extended to Etruscan society, despite the limitations of the available evidence (di Fazio 2012, 2018; Biella, Michetti 2018). It is important to note, however, that some scholars have expressed doubts about the concept of cultural memory and the scientific limitations of its use in reconstructing a society's belief systems, most notably due to the difficulty distinguishing between individual and collective memory, and the risk of overextending the term without clear boundaries. In response to these concerns, the concept of historical culture—a term rooted in historical scholarship and widely used in Germany—has recently been reintroduced, as "...a convenient shorthand for those various modes of cultural production that facilitated a society's engagement with its past" (Bernard 2023, 25).

## Section Two

### The Trauma of the Roman Conquest

To address the second theme, this section analyses the events surrounding the Roman conquest (396 BCE), including references to the religious rites performed (see most recently Fusco, Battistin 2022, 67–69, with previous bibliography). This episode encapsulates the most dramatic period experienced by the settlement, its inhabitants and its protective deities, who should be regarded as an integral part of the ancient city (...*id fiat deos moenia Veientium deserturos non esse*: Liv. 5.15.11) since its foundation. The primary ancient source on the subject is the Roman historian Livy, who recounts that the city of Veii, once renowned for its wealth (...*urbis opulentissimae Etrusci nominis*: 5.22.8) and Rome's fiercest rival, was condemned to a wretched fate after falling to Roman hands: the urban area was left devoid not only of its inhabitants, but also of the presence of the immortal gods (...*desertam ac relictam ad dis immortalibus*: 5.30.3; ...*desertam ab dis omnibusque*: 5.52.17). In fact, this act constituted the severest punishment the Romans could inflict upon an enemy city, according to their religious worldview (Gros 2011, 122). The episode is first analysed through the principal literary sources, rich in narrative detail, followed by a discussion of the scant archaeological evidence.

## Literary Sources

The discussion is limited to the final phase of the conquest; earlier episodes, such as the mysterious rising waters of Lake Albano, are addressed elsewhere (D'Arco 1997 and, more generally, in the commentary by Piccirilli 1983).

In the tenth year of the war between Veii and Rome, the Roman faction decided to appoint Marcus Furius Camillus as dictator, referred to as the *fatalis dux* (LIV. 5.19.2; Plut. *Cam.* 5.1). The Etruscan city had long been under Roman siege, and among the strategies employed to conquer it was the famous tunnel dug in the direction of the citadel, where the temple of the city's tutelary deity, *Juno Regina*, was located. This allowed a contingent of soldiers to infiltrate the city (LIV. 5.19.10–11 and 21.10; Plut. *Cam.* 5.4–5; D.C. 6.21). On the day chosen for the final assault, Camillus performed the auspices and addressed a prayer to two deities: Pythian Apollo, promising him a tenth of the spoils, and *Juno Regina*, asking her to abandon her current seat within the enemy city in favour of a new temple in Rome (LIV. 5.21.2–4; D. H. 13.3.3; this appeal to the goddess corresponds to the religious rite known as *carmen evocationis*). Immediately afterwards, a curse was pronounced, condemning the entire Veientine setting—the city, army, territory, and inhabitants—as reported solely by Macrobius (*sat.* 3.9.13; this corresponds to the religious rite known as the *carmen devotionis*). Once these rituals had been performed, an assault was launched on multiple fronts (LIV. 5.21.5). The group of Roman soldiers inside the tunnel burst forth at the temple of the city's tutelary deity, managing to interrupt a favourable sacrifice being conducted for the Etruscan king and spreading chaos by unlocking the city gates (LIV. 5.21.8 and 10; Plut. *Cam.* 5.6; it is during this moment that another well-known episode took place: the seizure of the *exta*, the entrails of the sacrificial animal used for divination, by the Roman soldiers, who delivered them to Camillus). Combat broke out within the settlement: the Roman soldiers set fires, and fighting spread throughout the entire city (LIV. 5.21.10–11). After a heavy loss of life on the enemy side, the dictator ordered an end to the bloodshed and commanded his troops to start looting (LIV. 5.21.13–14; Plut. *Cam.* 5.7). Camillus then prayed to Jupiter and the celestial gods, asking for their pardon in light of the violent acts committed and the immense wealth taken (LIV. 5.21.14–16; Plut. *Cam.* 5.7–9). The following day, after selling the city's remaining free citizens into slavery and carrying off its riches, the Romans decided to remove the votive offerings (*deum dona*) and the statues of the gods (*ipsosque deos*: LIV. 5.22.1–3), thus leaving the site devoid of any human or divine presence (LIV. 5.30.3 and 52.17). During the relocation of the statue of *Juno Regina* from her original temple to Rome—following the religious rite of *carmen evocationis*—the young Romans assigned to this task formally requested the goddess's consent to be moved. After receiving an affirmative response from her, she was transported to a new temple on the Aventine Hill (LIV. 5, 22, 4–7; D.H. 13, 3, 3; VAL. MAX. 1, 8, 3; Plut. *Cam.* 6, 1–2). The city of Veii was abandoned, but it was not completely destroyed or razed to the ground, as the following episodes demonstrate: a Roman army took refuge there after the defeat at the Allia against the Gauls (390 BCE: LIV. 5.38.8–10); the tribunes encouraged the plebeians to relocate there following Rome's destruction by the Gauls (389 BCE: LIV. 5.50.8); people who had moved there and occupied its vacant houses were summoned back to Rome (388 BCE: LIV. 6.4.5); an army was dispatched to the site to organise a defence against the Gauls (late 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE: LIV. 8.20.4–5).

The religious rites mentioned are the *carmen evocationis* and the *carmen devotionis*, the latter of which also includes the *consecratio* (Ferri 2010; Guittard 2012; Tarpin 2012). At a general level, the primary account of these rituals is a passage from Macrobius (*sat.* 3.9.1–13; see also PLIN. *nat.* 28.18), which describes them as being performed by Scipio Aemilianus before the conquest and destruction

of Carthage in 146 BCE (Guittard 2012, p. 359). The first formula is the *carmen evocationis* (imprecisely referred to as *evocatio*), which was a ritual used to summon the enemy city's tutelary deity over to the Roman side, with the promise of a new temple in Rome and public games held in the deity's honour, followed by the sacrifice of victims and the ritual inspection of their entrails. Immediately afterward came the *carmen devotionis* (also imprecisely referred to as *devotio hostium* and not to be confused with *devotio ducis*, the self-sacrifice of a general for victory: Tarpin 2012, p. 234). This rite involved dedicating the enemy army, city, territory and inhabitants to the chthonic deities (Dis, Veiovis, the *Manes*, or other such divinities). This was followed by the *consecratio* of the cities, lands, people and future generations to the infernal gods, and concluded with the sacrifice of three black sheep. Macrobius also provides a list of cities subjected to these rites (*sat.* 3.9.13), including Veii—one of the few historically attested cases, alongside Carthage and Corinth (Guittard 2012, p. 350; Ogilvie 1965, p. 674 mentions only the first rite, *evocatio*, and omits the second, *devotio*). These rituals have been interpreted as two interlinked and inseparable prayer formulas, reflecting an archaic ritual tradition (Guittard 2012, pp. 352–353), although academic debate on the matter remains ongoing.

### Archaeological Evidence

The most conclusive finding from recent research is that the powerful Etruscan city of Veii was already showing clear signs of contraction in building activity by the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Bartoloni, Tabolli, Cerasuolo 2019, 4). A clear and definitive break in occupation occurred during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, particularly in its first half. Despite numerous field investigations, archaeological research has not uncovered substantial evidence of violent destruction on the urban plateau datable to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the traditional date assigned to the city's conquest. However, a few isolated cases do stand out: remains (evidence of destruction and battle, such as arrowheads, javelins, lead sling bullets and javelin point fragments) have been found at the Campetti-Bastioni site (Tabolli, Cerasuolo 2019, 231; Biagi, Neri, Sartini, Sagripanti 2021), and a series of landfill deposits, used to construct a terrace, containing abundant rubble with traces of fire, have been identified in the Piano di Comunità area (Belelli Marchesini 2009, 67 and note 24).

### Reflections on the Trauma of the Roman Conquest

The capture of Veii has been interpreted in a variety of ways, as this non-exhaustive overview demonstrates: “*a moment of destruction... the capitulation of Veii... was total*” (Smith 2019a, 219); the Roman conquest did not entail the destruction of the Etruscan centre (Pulcinelli 2016, 19); the city was destroyed (Jolivet 2013, 151); the site was taken by the Romans thanks to a policy of alliances with leading Veientine families (Di Giuseppe 2018, 93–94); or through a process of “*fusion of two states rather than the sheer elimination of a rival*” (Terrenato 2019, 116). Based on the evidence presented in the preceding paragraphs, the most convincing hypothesis appears to be that of a conquest without the complete destruction of the settlement.

Topographic surveys (by Sapienza University and the University of Salento, Lecce), supported by aerial imagery and field surveys, have suggested that a new urban layout emerged during the Republican Period in the central area of the plateau. This may correspond to where the future

*municipium* would later rise during the Imperial Era. The new Roman settlement appears to have been planned and active by the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century and continued through the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, followed by a gradual decline during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE (Guaitoli 2016, 196 note 60; 197-198, 200). This scenario is corroborated by the study of ceramic finds from British surface surveys conducted on the urban plateau in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a lack of evidence in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, occupation appears to resume between the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, followed by a marked decline in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Di Giuseppe 2018, 96–100). The most interesting data comes from places of worship, which were abundant in the city during the Archaic Period (Colonna 2014; Bartoloni, Sarracino 2017). From the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Bouma 1996, 104–112; Michetti 2021, 27 suggests uninterrupted use of sanctuaries), Etruscan cult sites were once again frequented, new ones were founded, and many remained active until at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, especially those located near the city gates (Torelli 1999, 24–29; Torelli 2015; Di Giuseppe 2018, 97–98; for recent discoveries: Maras, Nonnis 2022). Mention should also be made of the deposit (Lanciani) at Piano di Comunità, which contained a vast quantity of votive material (statues, heads, figurines, terracotta animals, anatomical votives, pottery, etc.) associated with the cult of a major female deity and attesting to rites of passage, healing (*sanatio*), initiation and purification practices. Chronologically, the material ranges from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to a new surge in activity from the late 4<sup>th</sup> to the early–mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, with a gap in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Bartoloni, Benedettini 2011, 779–781; Michetti 2021, 35; Benedettini 2024, 105). This votive deposit has been linked to the cult of *Juno Regina* (Bartoloni, Tabolli, Cerasuolo 2019, 4; Benedettini 2024, 105) and to her cult building, whose location and architectural form remain uncertain. Hypotheses include a palatial-type shrine (Colonna 2012, 214; Di Giuseppe 2018, 74), or a “Tuscan temple with one or more rooms and a porch” (Edlund-Berry 2019, 129). Also noteworthy is the peri-urban sanctuary of Portonaccio, home to a cult area dedicated to Minerva (from the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and a Tuscan-style temple (late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), possibly dedicated to Heracle, Apollo and Tinia (Zeus) (Colonna 2019). Archaeological investigations reveal that the site suffered no damage during the siege and conquest. It was likely not before the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE that the temple was dismantled and its famous acroterial statues buried in a pit outside the sacred area (Glinister 2000, 59–60). The cult of Minerva persisted until the sanctuary’s complete abandonment sometime after the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Colonna 2002, 153; Ambrosini 2009, 38; Michetti 2021, 25). This brief overview, focused in particular on the cultic dimension, demonstrates that while many Etruscan sanctuaries were initially abandoned, they were once again frequented until at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, even though there is no evidence of significant structural renovations or new buildings during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. This is undoubtedly surprising in light of what the literary sources recount regarding the removal of divine statues, especially that of Juno, and of sacred *ex-votos*. In addition, if the Lanciani votive deposit is indeed linked to the cult of *Juno Regina*, it would suggest that devotion to an evoked deity persisted in its place of origin and that the “*sense of place*” remained strong in ancient ritual practice (Glinister 2000, 62). This was true even in the absence of the statue (Ferri 2010, 40–41) and despite the existence of the goddess’s main temple on the Aventine Hill in Rome (Prim 2021, 393–395).

It is important to note that the events described here should not be considered isolated occurrences but rather reflect a broader pattern of Roman behaviour following the capture of enemy cities (Ziolkowski 1993). Further examples of Roman violence during the conquest of central Italy include the cases of *Volsinii* and *Falerii*, where the inhabitants were forced to abandon their settlements and relocate to newly established sites (Marcone 2017).

## Section Three

### Final Remarks

This final section brings together the various points discussed above and offers some additional reflections. As a preliminary observation, it is worth reiterating that the episodes analysed in the first and second sections are presented as exemplary cases of Memory and Trauma, even though they are not directly connected or consequential. In the first case, an attempt has been made to reconstruct a fragment of the Etruscan site's original memory using both historical and archaeological sources, linked to the figure of its mythical founder. Two main challenges can be identified concerning this theme: (1) the absence of original Etruscan – and specifically Veientine – sources on the topic; and (2) the interpretative limits of the archaeological evidence uncovered during excavations. The first point is particularly significant, as the few available data have been extrapolated from later Roman sources, meaning that any attempt to reconstruct fragments of Veientine cultural heritage rests on fragile foundations. Of course, this lack of information is not confined to the case of Veii but is a broader issue in our knowledge of Etruscan civilisation (on Etruscan myths, see Domenici 2009; on sources for Etruscan religion, Smith 2019b; on studies of Etruscan cultural memory, see the first part of this article). As for the second point, the interpretative limitations of archaeological evidence remain a reality with which scholars will always have to contend: the same discovery may give rise to multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations. For this reason, it is methodologically necessary to distinguish and keep separate the sequences of historical and archaeological data, in order to avoid reciprocal influences or circular reasoning (see, for example, Gabba 1999). In the second case study, concerning Trauma, the same considerations regarding the archaeological data also apply to the historical sources. Livy, writing at the end of the 1st century BCE, describes the violent conquest of the Etruscan city, which had taken place nearly four centuries earlier, in 396 BCE. Not only has Livy's account been questioned and criticised by some scholars, but it also lacks firm confirmation from the archaeological record. Nevertheless, if we take the Roman historian's account as reliable, a direct connection between Trauma and Memory can be identified archaeologically: this is attested by the resumption of cultic activity, evidenced by archaeological materials in the city's Etruscan sanctuaries, even in the absence of the statue of the tutelary deity and of any significant building activity (see the previous paragraph). Finally, what has been observed at Veii does not constitute an isolated case. A useful comparison can be made with the case of the well-known Etruscan federal sanctuary of *Fanum Voltumnae*, recently identified at Campo della Fiera in the peri-urban area of the ancient city of *Velzna (Volsinii)*, modern-day Orvieto, and dedicated to the god *Voltumna* (for a recent overview of the building phases, monuments and cults, see Stopponi 2024). During the siege and conquest of the city in 264 BCE by the Roman consul Marcus Fulvius Flaccus, the federal sanctuary was also targeted. After the initial *evocatio* of the tutelary deity, proposed on the basis of indirect evidence (Ferri 2010, 129–147), the sanctuary was plundered and destroyed, with the recovery of a booty said to include 2,000 bronze statues (PLIN. *nat.* 34.34; most recently on the subject, see Della Fina 2024, 19–20). Despite the absence of its main deity and the extensive destruction it suffered—as was the case at Veii—cultic activity at the sanctuary did not cease, but continued for centuries, up until the end of the pagan era (Stopponi 2024, 250).

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**Literary sources** (For Latin authors, abbreviations follow the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*; for Greek authors, H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*.)

D.C.: Dio Cassius

D.H.: Dionysius Halicarnassensis

LIV.: T. Livius Patavinus

MACR.*sat.*: Ambrosius Macrobius Theodosius, Saturnalia

PLIN. *nat.*: C. Plinius Secundus, Naturalis historia

Plut.*Cam.*: Plutarchus, Camillus

VAL. MAX: Valerius Maximus

# «And So We Arrived in the Ghetto».\* The Łódź Ghetto in David Boder's Interviews

Stefania Zezza\*\*

**Abstract.** This article analyzes the interviews conducted by David Boder (1886-1961) with survivors of the Łódź Ghetto, focusing on the intersections of memory, trauma, spatial experience, and social structure. Boder's 1946 recordings, among the earliest oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors, offer a unique perspective because they provide a reconstruction of events from within and allow for an examination of how traumatic memory is narrated and mediated. Through the case of Israel Unikowski and others, the article explores how survivors reconstructed their lived experiences within the peculiar social and environmental conditions of the ghetto. The rigid bureaucratic structure of the Łódź Ghetto, the leadership of Chaim Rumkowski, and the totalizing function of forced labor profoundly influenced daily life, interpersonal relationships, and the narratives that emerged after liberation. Boder's role as interviewer, as well as the linguistic and cultural distance between him and the survivors, also shaped the way in which testimonies were formulated and recounted. From a methodological standpoint, the article reflects on how oral history functions not only as a repository of individual memory, but also as a performative act, conditioned by trauma, temporality, and the presence of the interviewer. Ultimately, the analysis contributes to a broader debate on Holocaust testimony, emphasizing the need to read oral sources critically and contextually to fully understand their complexity.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, Testimony, Traumatic Memory, Łódź Ghetto, Oral History.

**Riassunto.** «E così arrivammo nel ghetto». Il ghetto di Łódź nelle interviste di David Boder. Questo articolo analizza le interviste condotte da David Boder (1886-1961) con i sopravvissuti del ghetto di Łódź, concentrandosi sulle intersezioni tra memoria, trauma, esperienza spaziale e struttura sociale. Le registrazioni di Boder del 1946, tra le prime testimonianze orali dei sopravvissuti alla Shoah, offrono una prospettiva unica perché presentano una ricostruzione degli eventi dall'interno, e offrono l'opportunità di esaminare come la memoria traumatica venga narrata e mediata. Attraverso il caso di Israel Unikowski e altri, l'articolo esplora il modo in cui i sopravvissuti hanno ricostruito le loro esperienze vissute all'interno della peculiare situazione sociale e ambientale del ghetto. La rigida struttura burocratica del ghetto di Łódź, la direzione di Chaim Rumkowski, la funzione totalizzante del lavoro forzato hanno influenzato profondamente la vita quotidiana, le relazioni interpersonali e le narrazioni emerse dopo la liberazione. Il ruolo di Boder come intervistatore, la distanza linguistica, e culturale tra lui e i sopravvissuti, hanno inoltre inciso sul modo in cui le testimonianze sono state formulate e narrate. Dal punto di vista metodologico, l'articolo riflette quindi su come la storia orale funzioni non solo come deposito della memoria individuale, ma anche come atto performativo, condizionato dal trauma, dalla temporalità e dalla presenza dell'intervistatore. L'analisi contribuisce infine a un più ampio dibattito sulla testimonianza della Shoah, sottolineando la necessità di leggere le fonti orali in modo critico e contestuale per comprenderne la complessità.

**Parole chiave:** Shoah, Testimonianza, Memoria, Trauma, Łódź Ghetto, Storia Orale.

## Introduction

This paper investigates the Jewish condition and internal perspective on the Łódź Ghetto through an analysis of seven survivors' interviews conducted by the American psychologist David Boder in 1946. Examining these testimonies offers insight into what Jewish survivors remembered from their time in the ghetto and how they interpreted the events, figures, and dynamics of that environment.

Boder's primary objective was to explore how the catastrophe of the Holocaust had affected survivors' psyches. Using a wire recorder, he collected approximately one hundred interviews with individuals residing in Displaced Persons camps or temporary shelters in the immediate postwar

\* [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693/transcript?keywords%5B%5D=sent](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693/transcript?keywords%5B%5D=sent).

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period. Upon returning to the United States, he transcribed and translated these interviews. Boder's interviewing method was particularly attuned to identifying traumatic experiences, drawing attention to survivors' linguistic choices, specific expressions, and narrative structures.



**David P. Boder (1886-1961), pictured in the cover of the German edition (*Die Toten habe ich nicht befragt*. Edited by Julia Faisst, Alan Rosen & Werner Sollors. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011) of his book *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1949)**

This project has marked a significant milestone in the direction advocated, already in the aftermath of the war, by Philip Friedman, who emphasized the importance of giving voice to the victims in reconstructing the events of the Holocaust. Although Boder was not a historian, his interviews offer a distinctly Jewish perspective on the events of the Holocaust—in this case, life in the Łódź Ghetto. These testimonies were collected at a time when neither a coherent historical narrative nor a collective memory of the Holocaust had yet emerged; for many survivors, it was their first time recounting and articulating their experiences. Consequently, the events and details they chose to recall offer invaluable insight into both individual and communal memory.

This study approaches the interviews by focusing on key themes that align with central frameworks in memory studies: time, space, social structure and language. It considers the chronological dimension of the survivors' narratives: which events were remembered as pivotal, and why? To what extent do their memories converge or diverge? In terms of spatial perception: how was the ghetto environment experienced and recalled? What can these testimonies reveal about spatial awareness and movement within the ghetto? If, as Friedman suggested, the ghetto may be conceived as a "psycho-sociological laboratory," these interviews shed light on the character of ghetto society—its internal transformations, the interviewees' views on Chaim Rumkowski and the Jewish Council, perceptions of the German authorities, and the broader mechanisms of antisemitic policy. They also help to reconstruct the daily challenges of ghetto life, including the levels of knowledge, awareness, and understanding that inhabitants had about events both within and beyond the ghetto walls.

Ultimately, this analysis contributes to reframing established historical narratives through a Judeo-centric lens, offering new insights into life in the Łódź Ghetto by foregrounding survivor memory and interpretation.

## The Interviews

As Philip Friedman observed, *khurbn forshung* (destruction research)—what would later evolve into the field of Holocaust studies—could not rely exclusively on German sources, which were inherently biased sometimes, frequently misleading, and concerned primarily with administrative aspects of the persecution of the Jews. Friedman recognized the complexity inherent in reconstructing a history of events that were both unprecedented and methodologically challenging, necessitating the use of non-traditional historical materials. Thus, in order to attain a comprehensive understanding of the catastrophe, German official documents had to be complemented by Jewish sources—particularly those that reflected the victims’ perspectives, such as diaries, letters, and oral testimonies. Only through this integration of perpetrator records and victim narratives could historians approach a fuller, more nuanced reconstruction of the Holocaust experience,

be balanced and complemented by Jewish records and statements—interviews with Jewish survivors, reports by Jewish groups and individuals, and biographical materials. [...] The inner Jewish history, the sufferings and the spiritual life, are rarely or falsely reflected in the German sources, and must be studied in Jewish sources. (Friedman 1980, 503)

The Polish historian knew the issues connected to the collection, interpretation and use of ego documents, anyhow he believed that their inevitable subjective approach and their being limited to personal experience were not insuperable problems. Interviewers needed to be trained to use sociological methods, such as interviews and questionnaires, which had to be “matched and read against each other and further placed in context with perpetrator documents” (Jockush 2012, 9). In the summer of 1945, a comprehensive questionnaire was prepared in Łódź by the *Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna* (Central Jewish Historical Commission, CŻKH), which had originally been founded in Lublin at the end of 1944 by Philip Friedman and other survivors. The Commission’s primary objective was to collect and document evidence of the recent catastrophe that had befallen European Jewry. The questionnaire provided a detailed framework for interviewers, comprising 209 questions addressing both the social and historical dimensions of Jewish life during the Holocaust. Notably, it also included inquiries into the psychological condition of Jewish populations in ghettos and camps, thus reflecting an early recognition of the importance of understanding survivors’ inner experiences alongside factual documentation. This is precisely what David Boder undertook one year later, when he traveled to Europe to carry out his pioneering project of interviewing Holocaust survivors. Although Boder’s methodology was grounded in a psychological framework, his interviews have come to represent a valuable historical and sociological source for understanding and reconstructing the lived experiences of Jews in ghettos and concentration camps. Between July and September 1946, Boder conducted interviews with seven men who had been imprisoned in the Łódź Ghetto and were, at the time, residing as displaced persons in France. Their median age was 37 years, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 56. The first interview was conducted in Paris on 30 July 1946 with Adam Krakowski, who was born in Łódź in 1925. Additional insights into Krakowski’s experience can be found in a second interview conducted approximately five decades later as part of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) project that sought to re-interview Boder’s original subjects.<sup>1</sup> Israel Unikowski, born in Kalisz, Poland, in 1928, was another survivor interviewed by Boder—on 2 August 1946—and later re-interviewed by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) as part of its follow-up

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<sup>1</sup> <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn44522>

project. Boder met Unikowski at an institution operated by the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE) in the Château de Bucicaut at Fontenay-aux-Roses, France, where he also interviewed Mendel Herskovitz, born in Łódź in 1928, on 31 July 1946. The remaining interviews were conducted in August in Paris: Julian Weinberg, born in Łódź in 1890, was interviewed on 17 August; Jacob Minski, born in Zurich in 1907 but deported from Hamburg to the Łódź Ghetto, was interviewed on 23 August. The final two interviews took place on 13 September 1946 in Hénonville, with Itzhak Brin, aged 38, who had been in Sieradz at the outbreak of the war, and with Pinkhus Rosenfeld, born in Łódź in 1903.

The chronology of the interviews is relevant, since Boder, who did not know much about the Łódź ghetto at the beginning, progressively acquired more information and asked more and more details about the living conditions there. Krakowski, the first interviewee, could not talk much about the ghetto because he was deported in March 1940, before the ghetto was sealed. “A part of the Jews were sent to various towns in the General Government; not all [of them]. The rest remained in Łódź in the Ghetto”<sup>2</sup> he told Boder. The Germans sized his family’s apartment and sent them to Nowy Sącz inside the General Government, then he was deported from there to work as a forced laborer in Rodzno and other camps. Krakowski’s testimony illustrates the broader experience of Jews in Łódź following the German occupation. Upon seizing control of the city, the Nazi authorities dispossessed Jews of their homes and means of subsistence. In the early phase of occupation, they implemented a policy of deportation to the General Government as part of a wider effort to “Germanize” Łódź, which, having been incorporated into the Warthegau, was formally annexed into the Third Reich.

The second and third interviews—conducted with Mendel Herskovitz and Israel Unikowski, respectively—enabled Boder to gain a more comprehensive understanding of life inside the Łódź Ghetto. Herskovitz had initially attempted to flee the city as the German army advanced but was forced to return. He was subsequently interned in the ghetto, where he remained until 1943, when he was deported to Częstochowa. His family, who stayed behind in the ghetto, was murdered after his departure. One of the most compelling aspects of this interview is his emphasis on family life, which offers valuable insight into the shifting social dynamics within the ghetto under extreme conditions.

The interview conducted with Israel Unikowski, is particularly informative. Although he had prepared a written account of his life, Boder and his assistant persuaded him to give an unrestrained account about his experiences instead. They explained that their approach focused “exclusively upon verbal reports without notes or memoranda,”<sup>3</sup> highlighting the value they placed on oral testimony as a means of capturing the survivor’s immediate, unmediated, recollections. Unikowski and his brother were orphans. When the Germans occupied Poland, they left the orphanage in Kalisz and went to Łódź. Israel survived his brother and stayed in the ghetto until his deportation to Auschwitz, where he arrived on 21 August 1944. This boy’s resourcefulness and intelligence not only enabled him to survive alone until the liquidation of the ghetto, but also allowed him to grasp both the broader context and the intricacies of Jewish life within it. He was the demonstration that inside that context children had to develop adults’ skills and had to learn how to survive on their own.

The subsequent interviews were conducted with Jakob Minski and Julian Weinberg, aged 39 and 56 respectively, who recounted their experiences from the standpoint of adult men with a broader awareness of the ghetto’s social and administrative structures. Both provided valuable information concerning the internal administration of the ghetto, the organization of labor, and the final phase preceding its liquidation. Minski had been deported to the Łódź Ghetto in October 1941 as part of a transport from Hamburg. Employed as a firefighter, he occupied a relatively privileged position within the ghetto’s hierarchy and was later deported on the last transport from Łódź to Auschwitz. His testimony is especially significant, as he was among the few survivors from the group of Western European Jews deported to Łódź in 1941. Moreover, his account includes important details about the fate of certain deportees from Łódź upon their arrival at Auschwitz—information rarely documented in other sources. He witnessed the “newly arrived Łódź Jewish police being targeted for death by the

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<sup>2</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski)

<sup>3</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

veteran inmates of Auschwitz” (Niewyk 1998, 300) as a form of revenge for their behavior in the ghetto.

From a sociological perspective, this episode underscores the enduring impact of the ghetto’s pyramidal and unequal social structure, which extended its effects even into the context of Auschwitz. Julian Weinberg, an engineer who had lived in Łódź his entire life, provides further insight into these dynamics. Following his dismissal from professional employment, he worked in a furniture detail within the ghetto. Remarkably, he and his family remained in the ghetto beyond its official liquidation in 1944, offering a rare account of those who experienced its final days from within: “his job in the furniture shop explains why he was one of some 800 Jews exempted from the final evacuation of the ghetto to clear it of valuables, including furniture in need of repair.” (Niewyk 1998, 182).

His position allowed him to observe and recall what happened after the last deportations, the same happened to Itzhak Brin. At the beginning of his interview, he told Boder that he did not want to talk about the complete story of the Łódź Ghetto, but he would rather pick some special moments. Both Brin’s and Weinberg’s interviews document the situation of the Jews in the last phase of the ghetto. Pinkhus Rosenfeld, who was interviewed the same day as Brin, used to work in the food distribution and could inform Boder about the food supplies and how the distribution system worked. He was deported to Auschwitz on 25 August 1944, along with his wife—who was murdered there—and his sons.

Rosenfeld’s testimony illustrates the immediate consequences of the German occupation for Jewish property owners. Prior to the war, he had been a textile manufacturer and owned a factory in Zduńska Wola. Once his business was confiscated by the occupying authorities, his family was left without any means of livelihood, exemplifying the systematic economic alienation that accompanied the broader process of persecution and exclusion.<sup>4</sup> Each interviewee could provide an insight on the Łódź Ghetto from his perspective and according to his personal experiences and point of view. The analysis and the comparison of their interviews allows us to understand how the events affected the Jews and on which of them they focused more in building their narrative.

The selection of events recalled by the interviewees was shaped both by their personal experiences within the ghetto and by the questions of the interviewer. This dual influence underscores the mediated nature of their narratives: while rooted in individual memory, their accounts were also guided and structured by the interview context. As such, they should not be read in isolation but rather as fragments of a larger historical mosaic, because each interview offers a partial, situated perspective that, when examined alongside others, contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive reconstruction of life in the Łódź Ghetto.

## Before the Ghetto

In less than one hundred years Łódź underwent an impressive development: from being a small village, it became an important economical and industrial centre where the Jews played a significant role both as entrepreneurs and as workers, mainly in the textile industry. According to Israel Gutman,<sup>5</sup> the number of Jews resident in the city increased from 84 in 1808 to 233,000, about one third of the total population, in 1939. Among the interviewees, for instance, Krakowski’s father, who had lost his own factory in 1915, used to work in a textiles store, and Pinkhus Rosenfeld owned a textiles factory.

Even days before the German occupation of the city on September 8, 1939, panic spread among the population and about 70% of the Jews tried to leave. Mendel Herskovitz remembered that “a scare fell on the Jews when they found out that the Germans were near Łódź. On a Wednesday night began

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<sup>4</sup> On October 18th 1939 Jews were forbidden to trade in leather and textile goods. This ban was tantamount to complete elimination of the Łódź Jews from the market. The majority of the Jews was left without means. ([http://www.Łódź-ghetto.com/litzmannstadt\\_ghetto\\_-\\_the\\_calendar.html,2-39](http://www.Łódź-ghetto.com/litzmannstadt_ghetto_-_the_calendar.html,2-39))

<sup>5</sup> See Israel Gutman, “The distinctiveness of the Łódź Ghetto,” in Isaiah Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto. A History* (Bloomington, 2006), XXIX-LVII.

... people packed and began running farther [...] to be farther away from the Germans. I was also among them. I also ran.”<sup>6</sup> Eventually he had to go back, like Pinkhus Rosenfeld: “at once we were running. We did not know where, what, or when.”<sup>7</sup> Then he realised that “running was totally useless, so we turned around, and we came back to Łódź.”<sup>8</sup>

In those same days there was a centripetal movement towards Łódź. When the orphanage, where Israel Unikowski lived in Kalisz, was evacuated, he went with the other orphans to Łódź. They asked for help at the Jewish council and in that occasion, he met Runkowski: “we were received by an old man completely gray.”<sup>9</sup> After some hours, he put the orphans in the orphanage in Pomorska 19 where they stayed for two months. Itzhak Brin instead was sent from his hometown, Sieradz, to Łódź later, when the ghetto had already been established.

In November 1939 Łódź was annexed to the German Reich and included in the Warthegau. It became a German city, and its name was changed into Litzmannstadt on April 11, 1940. As soon as the Germans took over, they began implementing anti Jewish measures, which were issued one after the other quite quickly. Mendel Herskovitz told Boder that

on Rosh-Hashana [Jewish New Year] they entered...we remained until Pesach [Jewish Easter] till Pesach in '39 (1940). [...] until then there was still food...we traded a little and for the food we had to get up at three in the morning and stand in line for bread...and other such things...everything was already very hard.<sup>10</sup>

Julian Weinberg, who worked at the electricity plant of the city, had to leave his job and observed that the Jews

received such... [word not clear] marks of discrimination [??] as the armband, the yellow armband, so that we would be recognised on the streets as Jews. [...] Naturally the going about town was almost impossible for the Jews, because they were grabbed by the Germans on the streets. The Jews were [then] taken for most common labor. Regardless of who it was, whether he was a labourer or an intellectual, he had to perform the hardest forms of labor. I was compelled to scrub floors.<sup>11</sup>

Weinberg experienced particular distress over the abrupt loss of his social status. At the beginning of his interview, he emphasized with evident pride his former position as a chief engineer, highlighting the psychological impact of his downward social mobility. The imposition of anti-Jewish measures—such as the curfew, mandatory wearing of yellow star badges, mass conscription for forced labor, as well as widespread expropriations and looting—compelled many Jews to flee the city in the initial months following the German occupation. As part of their broader plan to Germanize Łódź, the Nazis intended to expel the entire Jewish population. While this policy was implemented at first, escalating logistical challenges in organizing deportations to the General Government ultimately led the Germans to establish the ghetto as a provisional solution. Krakowski and his family were forced to leave at that time. “A part of the Jews was sent to various towns in the General Government; not all [of them]. The rest remained in Łódź in the Ghetto”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>7</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem

<sup>9</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>10</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>11</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>12</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski) It is not possible to identify the exact date of Krakowski’s family resettlement, but the Germans began the resettlements to the General Gouvenement on December 12, 1939. They aimed at expelling all the Poles and the Jews from the areas annexed by the Third Reich.

**The Ghetto: “The worst part of the town was taken, and all the Jews were squeezed in there”<sup>13</sup>**

The Łódź Ghetto was one of the first ghettos established by the Germans in occupied Poland (February 1940) and also the most long-lasting, since it was sealed on 30 April 1940 and liberated by the Red Army in January 1945. The ghetto occupied an area of four-square meters which comprised “the worse section of the city,”<sup>14</sup> Bałuty, Stare Miasto (Old Town), and Marysin. These areas were poorly equipped: the buildings were mostly wooden houses, which did not have electricity nor a sewage system.



**The wooden footbridge built over Zgierska Street in the Łódź Ghetto.**

**Zgierska Street, which was important for city traffic, cut right through the ghetto.**

**Since the Nazis didn't want to reroute “Aryan” traffic, they divided the ghetto into sections on either side of the street, and in 1941 they ordered the construction of a wooden bridge so Jews could cross over without stepping onto the German-controlled street below, which was forbidden to them (Yad Vashem Photo Archives, 7261/24 – Courtesy of the German National Archive [Bundesarchiv])**

The Jews, impoverished, deprived of every possession, were forced to leave their houses, their remaining belongings and move to this crowded and unhealthy area: “all the Jews were squeezed in there. There were, I believe, a hundred and forty thousand people inside quite a very small area.”<sup>15</sup> The ghetto was entirely cut off from the rest of the city—and from the outside world—by barbed wire fencing that enclosed its guarded perimeter, reinforced by a designated no man's land that further ensured its physical and symbolic isolation.

As Isaiah Trunk stressed, “the Łódź Ghetto had certain characteristics that make it deserving of a special study. It was a ghetto with a pronounced character and of a special type.” (Trunk 2006, xvii) Isolation actually was one of its main features and played a significant role in its inhabitants' lives

<sup>13</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski)

<sup>14</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>15</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17639?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=krakowski)

since they depended on the meagre food rations provided by the Germans and could not usually smuggle food from the Aryan side of the city. In addition to that, they could hardly get any information from the outside and were mostly unaware of the fate awaiting them. Another fundamental aspect, which differentiated it from other ghettos, was its organization: Chaim Rumkowski, the controversial leader of the Jewish Council, believed that work and production of goods in the industrial infrastructures of the city would have saved at least a part of the Jews from resettlement. Therefore, Łódź became a huge opencast factory where all the inhabitants worked as slave laborers for the Germans. Those who could not or did not work were doomed to starve or to be deported and killed. Pinkhus Rosenfeld resumed the functioning of the ghetto economy:

[...] it was some sort of self-government with its own currency with some sort of self-sufficiency, that we were working for the Germans in all the shops and in every trade. And for that the Germans sent in for us the most meager, that means the minimum, food supplies and certain rations. On that we lived in the ghetto.<sup>16</sup>

Hunger, forced labor, and isolation consistently emerge as central themes across all the interviews.

## Chronology

Time functions as a social framework through which the activities and experiences of social groups are structured, sequenced, and later recalled. Boder's interviews reveal that certain key events emerged as temporal anchors in the collective memory of ghetto inhabitants, shaping the internal chronology by which survivors narrated their experiences. These events, which had a profound emotional and existential impact, served as the organizing nodes around which memories were constructed. One such pivotal moment was the establishment and eventual sealing of the ghetto, widely perceived by the Jews as a definitive rupture in their life, a boundary between past and present.

As Mendel Herskovitz recounted to Boder, approximately three weeks before Pesach,

the Jews were notified that the ... there was a part of Łódź that was called Balut [this was the slum] ... hm... that all the Jews had to live together in one quarter. It was called, naturally, a ghetto. On the second day of Pesach (*April 12*) in the last days, we arose in the morning. We saw that the ghetto was fenced in. (with wires and German soldiers).<sup>17</sup>

And Israel Unikowski:

And on Passover, on the first day of the mid-week an order came out. The ghetto is being closed. Every Jew who will be encountered in the city ... will be ... gets the death penalty. In the meantime, wires were installed around and around the ghetto. Every fifty meters stood a German guard.<sup>18</sup>

It is noteworthy that the temporal references employed by the interviewees were often drawn from the religious calendar—a natural framework given that the events were recalled from a distinctly Jewish perspective. In fact, as Samuel Gringauz remarks,

from the sociological point of view the ghetto was a unique social experience. It was a form of a national and autonomous Jewish concentration in which the conditions of existence were determined by a policy of persecution and annihilation imposed from without. (Gringauz 1950, 66)

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<sup>16</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>17</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>18</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

Unikowski remembered that after the sealing he had to move to an orphanage inside the ghetto on Dworska, 10. Since the ‘resettlement’ operation carried out by the Germans one block after the other was very violent,<sup>19</sup> Julian Weinberg observed that

the following days all the Jews went to the ghetto on their own. So, although it [the resettlement] was to last a week, all the Jews left the town on their own, because they have seen the inhuman methods with which the Jews were treated. And so, we were taken to the ghetto on foot; [...] The Ghetto of Łódź was completely isolated from the city... the worse section of the city.<sup>20</sup>

At first, people were able to survive selling their belongings or using the money they had managed to keep or hide, as the same Weinberg remembered: “At the beginning people still lived ... Everybody still had some money which he took with him ... and some people had taken some food also, provisions. And one could manage the first few days.”<sup>21</sup> Israel Unikowski too observed that then “Food was still a little easier to get. But this lasted a short time.”<sup>22</sup> Pinkhus Rosenfeld had previously gone to Warsaw where he had left part of his family. Since they did not have enough money to survive there, he went back to Łódź where, he told Boder, “We still had buried a little Polish money.”<sup>23</sup> His plan was to take the money and go back to Warsaw. They returned to Łódź before Pesach “there was already established a ghetto, already with all the trappings.”<sup>24</sup> He tried to escape again “five days before Pesach” but did not succeed “And on the thirtieth [day] of the fourth [month] the ghetto was to be closed.”<sup>25</sup>

The second major event the survivors remembered was the appointment of the Jewish Council with his leader, Chaim Rumkowski. He had been the Chairman of the Jewish congregation from 12 September, and had been appointed Elder of the Jews on 13 October 1939. Nonetheless, the interviewees who were inside the ghetto from its beginning usually mentioned him as the ‘president’ only after the sealing of the ghetto: before that Rumkowski was not perceived as powerful as he became later. Herskovitz, for instance, told Boder: “There was a president Rumkowski. A Jew who before the war was the head of the orphanages. And, in the ghetto, he became the Elder of Jews.”<sup>26</sup>

Another chronological step recalled by the interviewees concerned the deportations. As Unikowski observed: “The hunger, the need, and the epidemics still were not able to break the ghetto. The worst thing in the ghetto were the deportations... It was nineteen forty-two ... they began to send away thousands of people.”<sup>27</sup> At that time, in September 1942 the deportation of the children and of the old and sick people occurred. That episode in particular marked the memory of the interviewees since it was extremely traumatic and directly affected them and their families: “the most terrible event in the Ghetto of Łódź was the *Sperre* ... It was about ten days before Rosh Hashona.”<sup>28</sup> As was customary, the date was expressed with reference to Jewish holidays, which constituted the primary temporal framework of the community. Additionally, the closure of the ghetto and the subsequent raid were described using the German term employed by the Nazis at the time—language that had become embedded in the vernacular of the persecuted as a way to denote such events.

Pinkhus Rosenfeld explained to Boder the way people were then selected for deportations: first the so-called criminals, then single people, who generally were from the provinces and had already

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<sup>19</sup> 6 March 1940 is remembered as the bloody Thursday, since the Germans conducted an Aktion to transfer the Jews to the ghetto. They ordered the people living in Piotrkowska street to get ready and leave immediately. Those who refused to do that were killed on the spot.

<sup>20</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem

<sup>22</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>23</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem

<sup>26</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>27</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem

lost their families, then the children and the sick: “This took place in the space of time from the 5<sup>th</sup> of September until the 12<sup>th</sup> 1942. Two thousand children...”<sup>29</sup> The deportations in 1944 marked another step: “In nineteen forty-four, in the beginning, there came again a deportation, it was already carried out with another system. Every factory had to surrender fifty per cent of the people to be sent away.”<sup>30</sup>

Then in the summer there was “the general deportation of the Ghetto of Łódź. They started to send people, five thousand persons a day. It became gradually worse and worse. There was no more order. There was no way out.”<sup>31</sup> This is how the event was remembered by Unikowski, who was sent to Birkenau at that time.

Chronology was marked also by the epidemics which affected the ghetto: first dysentery and typhus, then tuberculosis. In his testimony Unikowski declared: “The first epidemic in the Ghetto of Łódź was dysentery. People died like flies.”<sup>32</sup> Then Minski told Boder that the typhus epidemic killed many of the ‘Western’ Jews, that was after October 1941. Unikowski again, talking about the deportations in 1944, explained: “Beside the deportation there had reigned at that time in the ghetto terrible epidemics of lung disease [...] in the ghetto there were, out of a hundred per cent of the people, there were sixty, seventy per cent sick with tuberculosis.”<sup>33</sup> Memories of these events were strong because they affected the interviewees personally and changed ghetto’s inhabitants’ daily life.

## Topography

“There was a part of Łódź that was called Balut (*Baluty*) [this was the slum] that all the Jews had to live together. It was called naturally a ghetto.”<sup>34</sup> The ghetto constituted not the physical and the social space within which the interviewees experienced the events they later recounted to Boder. Certain locations acquired particular significance in their memories and were often associated with traumatic or pivotal moments. A preliminary distinction must be made between open or public spaces and enclosed or private interiors. Strikingly, the interviewees’ recollections focus almost exclusively on the former. None of them, with the exception of Itzhak Brin—who mentioned entering apartments as part of his work with a post-liquidation cleaning unit—spoke about the interiors of the dwellings where they lived. This absence reflects the reality of daily life in the Łódź Ghetto, which unfolded primarily in public spaces such as workshops, streets, and squares. Overcrowding, the pressure of forced labor, and the lack of material and psychological privacy made the maintenance of familial and domestic life extraordinarily difficult. The events that shaped the survivors’ memories occurred predominantly in communal or outdoor settings—at the train station, in the streets, at public gatherings, or within the cemetery.

These spaces functioned not only as the physical backdrop of daily life in the ghetto but also as symbolic sites where trauma was experienced and memory was anchored. For instance, Israel Unikowski managed to escape the children’s deportation through the Beth Olom cemetery. That same cemetery later became the site where Itzhak Brin and other Jews were compelled to dig graves for Poles executed by the Germans following the ghetto’s liquidation. The Beth Hachaim cemetery also served earlier in the war as a transit point for Jews attempting to flee the ghetto: Pinkhus Rosenfeld, together with his wife and sons, sought to escape through it in an effort to reunite with his daughters in Warsaw, but the attempt failed.

Another place that acquired deep symbolic meaning was the Gosciny Dwór, where Chaim Rumkowski delivered his infamous speech urging the deportation of children—a moment that etched itself into the collective memory of the ghetto’s inhabitants as a defining trauma. Unikowski also referred to three different orphanage locations that marked his personal trajectory: the first at 19

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<sup>29</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>31</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>34</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

Pomorska Street, opposite the offices of the Jewish Community; the second on 10 Dworska Street, within the ghetto, to which he was relocated after the Germans took over the first building; and finally, the orphanage in Marysin, from which the children were eventually taken to the assembly point during the deportation. Hospitals, too, emerged as significant sites within the topography of memory in several testimonies, often associated with both care and vulnerability, as well as the threat of selection and deportation. Unikowski went to visit his dying brother everyday and told Boder: “I came everyday to the hospital. One can’t imagine what a hospital looked like in the ghetto!”<sup>35</sup> Weinberg too mentioned them as the places from where people were taken out to be deported in September 1942. Therefore, hospitals—typically associated with care and healing—became sites of fear, threat, and danger within the ghetto, symbolizing not recovery but the risk of deportation and death.

## Rumkowski

In all the studies about Łódź Chaim Rumkowski occupies a relevant place. His controversial figure as the head of the Jewish Council in the Łódź Ghetto has been studied and interpreted more than any other Jewish leader in the ghettos. His role as ‘president’ of the second largest ghetto in Poland and his peculiar features have been debated by many historians and Holocaust scholars or writers. Philip Friedman defined Rumkowski “a pseudo-savior” one of those ghetto leaders “who believed that they would manage to save at least a portion of their people by autocratic deeds in the spirit of the German Führer.”(Friedman 1980, 334). The Polish historian remarked that not only ambition and “desire of power and honor,” but also the “feeling of a historical mission” had motivated him. He recognized that the Elder, not a coward, took his role very seriously and had good organizational skills. His biggest mistake was that he did not understand the Germans’ purposes and the role he was playing in that, until was too late.

Isaiah Trunk was also extremely critical in judging Rumkowski, whom he defined as a “despotic autocrat” (2006, 314) and a “heartless bureaucrat” (2006, 317) who had a “decisive influence on the formation of the inner conditions of the ghetto.” (2006, 313). He was one of those people who Primo Levi included in the “gray zone”, that moral area where the distinction between good and evil, victims and perpetrators, is blurred:

If he had survived his own tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto which he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would have absolved him, nor certainly can we absolve him on the moral plane. But there are extenuating circumstances: an infernal order such as National Socialism was, exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself. To resist it a truly solid moral armature is needed, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski, the Łódź merchant, together with his entire generation, was fragile. (Levi 1988, 49)

In analyzing the role of the Jewish Councils and the actions of their leaders, it is essential to acknowledge that, unlike our retrospective understanding, they were often unaware of the full scope of the German plans. They did not foresee that the ghettos would serve as a preliminary stage in a broader process of deportation and extermination, nor that their “forced cooperation” (Trunk 1976, 570) would ultimately contribute to the machinery of annihilation. They tried to find a way to save as many people as possible from a mostly unknown fate. Some of them, like Rumkowski, believed that work could have been a solution: the Jews could survive if they were considered to be essential for the Germans’ economy and war effort.

Within an unprecedented context—isolated from the outside world—Rumkowski established a regime that was not only perceived as autocratic but functioned as such in practice. While he was obligated to carry out German orders, he also saw himself as entrusted with the mission of saving the Jewish community, a mission he pursued in accordance with his own personality and principles. It

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<sup>35</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

was precisely this perception of agency that led many within the ghetto to believe that his decisions were autonomous, and that he bore direct responsibility for their consequences.

What did the survivors interviewed by David Boder in 1946 think of him? Given the proximity to the events, and the emotional and psychological weight they still carried, the interviewees' judgments were deeply shaped by the immediacy of the tragedy. Several recurring memories about Rumkowski appear across the testimonies, forming a kind of collective narrative. Foremost among them is his association with children—both in terms of his apparent concern for their welfare and, more tragically, his role in their deportation in September 1942. Rosenfeld defined him with these words: “A man who was childless. A man who had done much for orphans.”<sup>36</sup> Actually, before the war he had been the director of the orphanage in Helenowek and, also in the ghetto, he took care of the orphans. When Israel Unikowski and the other orphans from Kalisz arrived in Łódź, and they met Rumkowski. “The old man, who was the [one] later known as President Rumkowski, stopped us, read the petition,<sup>37</sup> and answered us, Dear children, I have nothing to help you.”<sup>38</sup> But later, in the afternoon, he solved the problem and put them in the orphanage in Pomorska 19. When the situation in the ghetto became worse, Unikowski remembered that the majority of the people hated the President but “Us children he treated very well.”<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, in August 1942, when the Germans ordered the deportation of 20,000 Jews, Rumkowski declared that to save the ghetto it would have been better to deport the unproductive part, such as young children and sick people, in order to save the others. About that Pinkhus Rosenfeld told Boder:

Rumkowski came out seemingly with such a broken spirit. How much truth there lay in it we did not know, because we already knew that he has sold out to the Germans... But it is not believable that he did want [covet] so much, that he did not foresee that he will have to serve the Germans with so much. But now he already had to.<sup>40</sup>

He heard then Rumkowski delivering “the most infamous speech in the being of the ghetto.”<sup>41</sup> He remembered that “he gave us to understand that we must save ourselves, and that it is a decree ... Save ourselves, and with that, that we will hand over the small children...”<sup>42</sup> Rumkowski called that “the last burned offering [sacrifice].” (*der letzter khorbn* in Yiddish). The reaction to that request was dramatic: “Naturally, there arose a screaming, wailing. “You lunatic, down from the platform, people screamed.”<sup>43</sup> Many children were hidden or managed to escape.

But the Germans saw that they have too few children. And Rumkowski, who like always, never refused... took and handed over the orphanages, the orphanage where I was. [...] At that time there were in the orphanage, in the so-called children's colony, one thousand two hundred children. [...] In the morning there came to us a messenger, and [he] said that around eleven o'clock we are leaving for the square there and there. And naturally, perish the thought, we won't be sent away. The German only wants to take a look at us. We should dress nicely, and we shouldn't worry about anything. [...] Jewish police, fire-fighters, chimney sweepers... whoever wore a hat, and a uniform surrounded us, with a triple line [?]. Wagons began to arrive. We began to run away, but it wasn't possible because there were police around and around. [...] When they surrounded us from three sides, when we saw the wagons arriving, we got together five or six boys, and we ran over to the fence.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>37</sup> A letter with a request to help the orphans had been written by the Kalish community and was addressed to the Jewish community in Łódź.

<sup>38</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>40</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>41</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>42</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>43</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>44</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

Israel and other four children hid for eight days; when they went back to the orphanage, it was empty. They managed to survive by themselves since they had acquired early practical skills which allowed them to face the harshness of the life in the ghetto.

In addition to the significance of this testimony in reconstructing the events surrounding the deportation of the children, it is noteworthy to examine what emerges regarding Rumkowski. Unikowski's account suggests that he perceived Rumkowski as consistently compliant with German orders. This recollection sheds light on the forced cooperation and the complex dynamics between Rumkowski and the German authorities. In the testimonies, Rumkowski is often seen as responsible for implementing the Germans' directives. At times, the interviewees seem to suggest that he was not merely an executor of orders but, rather, an individual who made key decisions within the ghetto, further complicating the understanding of his role. About the deportation of the children and the weakest people of the ghetto, Rosenfeld observed that "it looked as if, that generally [in fact], the German had not [given?] such [?] an order, but we were gripped by such horror that we thought that we must comply at once."<sup>45</sup> Apparently, people in the ghetto, like Rosenfeld, were not completely sure about the origin of the orders. Rumkowski had become such a central figure and had displayed his 'apparent' power so much that people believed he was responsible for decisions which actually came from the Germans. According to Itzhak Brin: "Rumkowski was very ... a leader of the German powers. Everything had to be exact. Everything that he got from Amtsleiter Biebow. He with the help of his police carried out precisely. [unintelligible]. He was a very strong person, huge. [unintelligible]."<sup>46</sup>

Julian Weinberg explained to Boder that he did not want to be involved in the council and participated "little in the community affairs"<sup>47</sup> since he did not like Rumkowski's overbearingness and his obedience to the Germans: "He received the orders directly ... the orders from the ghetto management, and he afterwards executed the orders..."<sup>48</sup> About the relation between Rumkowski and the Germans, Jacob Minski observed: "[he was] an exploiter in favour of the Germans. If the Germans [demanded] a hundred percent [production], he would deliver a hundred and fifty percent."<sup>49</sup> The fact that Rumkowski promptly executed the orders led people in the ghetto to think that he "was eighty percent for the Germans...and 20% for the Jews. He did what he could to aid the Germans rather than the Jews..."<sup>50</sup> And Mendel Herzkoviz commented: "Everybody thought that he was an exploiter of the Jews."<sup>51</sup>

Another aspect which is connected with Rumkowski's role is his authoritarian power and people's reaction to that. Everybody in Łódź knew who he was before the war:

The Elder of the Jews was Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski. In Łódź he was known. The man was a Jewish community worker... At the time when the German marched to Łódź, he was one of the Jewish civic leaders... because of his patriarchal appearance he [the Germans] made him remain. The rest, all the civic leaders, he sent away to Dachau where they perished. And in this way, he took over the complete leadership.<sup>52</sup>

The ghetto was "Rumkowski's kingdom."<sup>53</sup> Here Rosenfeld provided an explanation to Rumkowski's appointment and to his power, trying to make sense of what happened to the members

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<sup>45</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>46</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin)

<sup>47</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem

<sup>49</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski)

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem

<sup>51</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>52</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem

of the first Council, who often disagreed with the leader and suddenly were arrested. Rumkowski then chose the members of the second Council among people he knew would have obeyed his orders.

According to Jacob Minski, “Rumkowski was actually like a king; he behaved...if according to his theory ... according to his point of view every person belonged ... belonged to him.”<sup>54</sup> And he seemed to have the traditional prerogatives of a king, like that of minting coins: “There was in ghetto Jewish money. This money had a Star of David ... with a Star of David, signed Rumkowski Chaim, and for this money we could get things. For this money we could buy things in the ghetto. Naturally, outside of the ghetto this money was worthless.”<sup>55</sup> Of course, he could not have done that without the permission of the Germans, who could easily exploit the Jews without any economic issues, but his signature there and his ubiquitous power led people to call this money *chaimka o rumka*. Even stamps, valid only inside the ghetto, were printed with his face on them. Children like Israel Unikowski could understand that: “He wasn’t just president. He was a Kaiser [emperor], one may say. His word was as from a dictator.”<sup>56</sup>

It is noteworthy that the words used by the survivors to define his power are linked to the semantic field of autocracy: kaiser, king, kingdom, emperor, dictator. This is the reason why most of the people did not like him: “One can say that out of a hundred per cent of the ghetto there was ninety-five per cent who hated him terribly. A few times attempts on his life were made. They wanted to kill him.... But he had with him the German might. ... And nothing happened to him.”<sup>57</sup> Rumkowski was considered responsible for the selections during the deportations, what people asked themselves was: “How they were chosen? This is THE question. This is the greatest guilt [crime] of Rumkowski without question [?]. People that were sick, weak and old were taken.”<sup>58</sup> In addition, Rumkowski imposed severe penalties on individuals selected for deportation who failed to report to the designated assembly point, employing the threat of starvation as a means to deter attempts at hiding. “For this Rumkowski had a good remedy. To the store where he received his food rations was sent... such and such a man does not receive any more bread.”<sup>59</sup> Within the Łódź ghetto—where smuggling was virtually impossible and food distribution was strictly controlled by the Jewish Council—being denied access to bread rations was effectively a death sentence. This context helps to explain why Unikowski recalled an episode with particularly grave consequences for the ghetto’s inhabitants, and for which Rumkowski was widely blamed: “A lot, a lot of potatoes was brought into the ghetto. And when it was asked of Rumkowski why he doesn’t distribute them, he answered, ‘You have no business to meddle in my affairs. I’ll distribute the potatoes when I want!’”<sup>60</sup> The potatoes eventually rotted and became inedible; they were buried and covered with chlorine. Yet, for the next three years, starving individuals continued to search for them in the area where they were believed to have been disposed of. In the early phase of the ghetto’s existence, food distribution was managed by house committees, but it quickly became evident that the system was rife with corruption. Then, “Rumkowski remedied this. It may be considered in favour of Rumkowski that he didn’t permit theft.”<sup>61</sup> In an attempt to address the dysfunction and corruption of the house committee system, the Eldest of the ghetto introduced a centralized food distribution network through designated distribution centers.

However, Rumkowski’s authority—once largely unquestioned—began to wane following the mass deportations of 1942, particularly after the traumatic events of the so-called “Sperre” and the forced removal of children. These events deeply eroded his legitimacy in the eyes of many ghetto inhabitants, who increasingly questioned both his decisions and his motivations. At that time Biebow deprived him of “two crucial aspects of the ghetto management” (Trunk 2006, xi), the labor apparatus

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<sup>54</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski)

<sup>55</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem

and the supply division, which was transferred to David Gertler, who was a Gestapo agent and the head of the ghetto police. Israel Unikowski mentioned him since in the first phase, 1940, he could smuggle people out of the Ghetto to Warsaw: “He began to take people out of the ghetto illegally. Illegally and legally. That means the Germans knew about it. It has cost two hundred or three hundred marks per person.”<sup>62</sup>

## Food and Hunger

The Łódź ghetto was hermetically isolated, very poor-quality food supplies were provided by the Germans in exchange for what the Jews produced in the factories inside the ghetto, smuggling was impossible or extremely dangerous, the rations scarce, and the inflation significantly affected the prices. Hunger, a central and omnipresent reality in the Łódź Ghetto, played a crucial role in shaping interpersonal relations and the broader social fabric. As food became increasingly scarce, access to it turned into a key marker of power and privilege. Those who were part of the administrative or industrial structures—particularly individuals employed in Rumkowski’s bureaucracy or in essential workshops—often had better chances of survival due to slightly improved rations or opportunities for barter. Conversely, the most vulnerable—children, the elderly, and the unemployed—faced near-certain starvation. This stratification exacerbated existing inequalities and led to tensions, resentment, and moral dilemmas within the community. In this context, social cohesion often gave way to individual strategies of survival, and acts of solidarity were as frequent as betrayal or indifference. Food was the main concern for the interviewees, this is evident because, in their testimonies, episodes and events revolved around it. During the first weeks after the ghetto was sealed, “began the tragic time of the ghetto. People started to swell up from hunger. A deka...a deka of sugar did cost twenty marks.”<sup>63</sup> People “began to receive very little food.”<sup>64</sup> Also young boys, like Mendel Herskovitz, felt the responsibility of helping their parents:

So whichever way we could help ourselves, we helped [ourselves] so that the family at home also had...also did...hungered much less because of...that...that I helped to earn, so that there should be more food in the house.<sup>65</sup>

Jacob Minski, who was deported to Łódź with a transport from Hamburg in October 1941, gave an interesting testimony about the different values of products in the ghetto:

It was this way for a long time, that the values of objects ... in general, had no special values, while foodstuffs... had an unbelievable value. I remember, for instance, I had a new suit of clothes with me among other things—a new suit of clothes for which I paid 350 Marks in Hamburg. So you see, it was quite a piece of wealth. And I got one kilo of flour for it. You could purchase a pair...a pair of shoes for a hundred grams of margarine; and you see that from these prices things, objects other than food or cigarettes, were worth nothing. [...] Then, for the sake of saving one’s life, one was ready to sacrifice all these things.<sup>66</sup>

The same Minski, who was later in Auschwitz, considered hunger the worst issue in the ghetto: as a fireman he earned three ghetto marks per day, the cost of bread at the black market was 1,800 marks. The price of goods in the Łódź Ghetto fluctuated significantly based on availability, with scarcity often driving dramatic increases. Soup tickets and bread rations, essential for survival, were frequently exchanged or sold in informal markets to obtain other necessities. Pinkhus Rosenfeld

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<sup>62</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>63</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem

<sup>65</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>66</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski)

described himself as relatively fortunate, as he served as the head of a local provisioning point in one area of the ghetto, which allowed him access to slightly more food. He explained to Boder that provisions were generally distributed on a biweekly basis and included approximately thirty grams of turnip with no fats, while bread rations amounted to two kilograms every eight days. The extreme scarcity of food also gave rise to illicit acts—such as theft and even murder—as survival strategies. Following successive deportations and the resulting decline in population, food became relatively more abundant. Itzhak Brin, one of those who remained in a part of the ghetto (*the camp*) after its official liquidation, recalled to Boder:

The food was also very good in the camp, because large warehouses remained full of food for the whole ghetto—seventy thousand Jews, so there was food remaining, certainly enough to feed eight hundred people, especially if the Germans wanted us to work fast. They told us to eat as much as we wanted, because they wanted the work to go as fast as possible.<sup>67</sup>

## The Germans

The Germans were the rulers of the ghetto, but, except for some of them who were well known, they are usually remembered as an indistinct group of perpetrators. Their main characteristic was their deceiving attitude: Israel Unikowski remembered when the Viennese entered the ghetto.

They came in from [conditions of] utter abundance. There were among them Jews who even had served in the German army. When we asked them why they were sent to the ghetto they said that the Germans want to protect them from the bombs, because where they are [from], there are severe bombings and here there are no bombings. You know the German Jews!<sup>68</sup> In such a way people were deceived.<sup>69</sup>

The same Unikowski, who managed to hide during the deportation of the children, told Boder “We already knew then that under the Germans to be sent away is not one of the simplest things. That we are not going ... that we are not going to pick radishes or leaves, but we are really going to [our] death.”<sup>70</sup>

By September 1942, rumors concerning the true fate of the deportees had begun to circulate within the ghetto. Yet, for many, the reality was too horrific to accept. The Jewish leadership—who may have had a clearer understanding of the deportations’ actual destination—chose to remain silent. Julian Weinberg, in his interview with Boder, revealed that even as late as August 1944, during the final phase of the ghetto’s liquidation, many still believed the Germans’ assurances. They were told that the deportations were part of a resettlement plan, aimed at transferring Jews to Germany for labor under improved conditions. The narrative was also framed as a protective measure, allegedly intended to shield Jews from the dangers posed by the advancing Eastern Front. Another characteristic of the Germans the survivors remembered was their rapacity. Minski, for instance, told that they took advantage of the products sold in the ghetto in exchange for food: among them, “who would at times come into the ghetto with one pound of bread or margarine, would afterwards leave with a trunkful of new things.”<sup>71</sup>

The economical advantages of the exploitation of the Jews were the reason why Hans Biebow, whose name was mentioned and was well known among the Jews, was interested in preserving the

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<sup>67</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin)

<sup>68</sup> Polish Jews considered the German Jews naive and the relations between the different national groups were problematic.

<sup>69</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem

<sup>71</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski)

production. He was the head of the Nazi administration of the ghetto. “This Ghetto Council was actually an outgrowth of the...of the City Council. At the head of the Ghetto Council stood the famous Bieburg (Biebow). He was a German from Bremen. A merchant.”<sup>72</sup>

He was not only the administrator of the ghetto, but took part in the deportations and in killing operations. Israel Unikowski saw him during the children deportation: “The fuehrer was then Hans Bubov (*sic*). He was the fuehrer of these selection.”<sup>73</sup> He arrived in the square where the children from the orphanage were being gathered, “He began to look [us] over. He passed through, one, two, three. He came over to a small boy of ten years. Oh, you little one. Do you know what is about to happen to you? You are all going to be shot.”<sup>74</sup> Itzhak Brin recalled that during the final phase of the ghetto, when he was part of the group assigned to remain behind and carry out post-liquidation tasks—known as the Clean-Up Unit—he was also compelled to dig mass graves for Polish prisoners who were about to be executed. One day, Biebow “appeared with another Gestapo official as we were coming from the digging, and he said...I just happened to hear, oh yes, “We will put the heads on this side, the feet on this side and the children here in the middle...”<sup>75</sup>

## Work

After the Germans entered the city, they began taking Jews for forced labor: “They drove around and caught people... Jews, to work, especially Jews.”<sup>76</sup> When the ghetto was closed, work became the only way to survive: the Jews “had to earn their living.”<sup>77</sup> Many factories, which produced several kinds of products, were created: “One simply cannot imagine the factories that were organized in the ghetto.”<sup>78</sup> Unikowski, despite his young age worked in a tailor factory and was paid with ghetto money, Pinkhus Rosenfeld’s children worked too: “Seeing that whoever will work will not be deported, and we already knew the odor of the deportation, so that even eight year old children were sent to work.”<sup>79</sup> As Jacob Minski told Boder: “Everyone could get a job in his own trade because the Łódź Ghetto, as the Germans ... as the Germans themselves claimed, [was] a model ghetto.”

Minski chose to join the fire department because he considered it a relatively “easy” position—less physically demanding than the twelve-hour shifts required in the ghetto’s factories. His role allowed him to remain in the ghetto until the final deportation transport. Although he was offered the opportunity to stay longer as part of the Clean-Up Unit, he opted to leave, under the belief—still widely held at the time—that he was being sent to Germany for labor. Approximately 860 individuals, including Weinberg and Brin, remained in the ghetto to carry out post-liquidation tasks. Their duties included cleaning the area and collecting various materials, such as valuables and furniture requiring repair. Men and women were housed separately in two factory buildings, which had “become some kind of lager”<sup>80</sup> where they were subjected to strict rules and discipline. Before the liquidation Weinberg had worked in the furniture shop, this may be the reason why he was kept in the ghetto and exempted from the deportation. Even though there was no active armed resistance in Łódź, Weinberg revealed to Boder that the Jews resisted in other ways. Since work and production were the main goals, and the Jews did not want to work for the Germans, they carried out “a kind of silent sabotage against” them. They worked slow.

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<sup>72</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>73</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>75</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin)

<sup>76</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>77</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>78</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>79</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>80</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

## Social Conditions

Immediately from the beginning of the German occupation, Jews were deprived of their money and their social status was seriously affected. Julian Weinberg, an engineer, lost his job and his position. He remarked that it did not matter whether an individual was an intellectual or a laborer, they were both “grabbed by the Germans on the streets [...]” and “had to perform the hardest forms of labor.”<sup>81</sup> And intellectuals were usually treated much worse. An episode like that happened to him at the beginning of March 1940, while he was returning home after his mother burial in the cemetery where he was alone, nobody else could attend.

Family life was affected as well. Families were separated, often for ever: Pinkhus Rosenfeld’s relatives were scattered between Warsaw and Łódź from the beginning of the occupation. According to Trunk, family became a “work cell” (Trunk 2006, 299) where each member used to work all day, thus also the traditional gendered family roles underwent a radical modification. The harsh living conditions within the ghetto caused changes in social norms: social behaviors which previously were not accepted became ordinary. Several reasons took people to adjust their morality and habits to the new deculturated environment. The most important was chronic hunger which led people to steal. Herskovitz told Boder: “I did hunger...Even in the ghetto I did also. Among us it was called ‘organizing’... Too kosher it was not, but for the hungry one it was called kosher.”<sup>82</sup> Thefts were severely punished though; they became a reason why people considered criminal were included in the deportation lists:

If one had stolen once a piece of wood from an old fence,<sup>83</sup> or if a cart with potatoes passed on the street and a child of five years ran after it and grabbed a raw potato, this constituted already one of the worst crimes, for which they were in the first line, and these were sent away.<sup>84</sup>

Interpersonal relations too were deeply affected by the living conditions. Replying to Boder who asked about sex life in the ghetto, Minski told him that, on the one hand, the sex drive was “suppressed by protracted starvation and continuous terror,”<sup>85</sup> on the other prostitution was rampant: girls sold themselves for a slice of bread in the corners of the streets or in the yards.<sup>86</sup>

The social condition of the deportees from Germany, Austria and the Protectorate<sup>87</sup> needs to be analyzed separately, at least at the beginning. Julian Weinberg thought that their inability “to adjust rapidly to the hard living conditions in the ghetto”<sup>88</sup> caused the death of 90% of them. Among the interviewees only Jacob Minski was from the group of Western Jews. At their arrival they were assembled in a school, “it was in frightful conditions.”<sup>89</sup> The newcomers were shocked by the hygienic conditions which, according to Minski, were “worse than in a concentration camp.” They “were unable to imagine what that meant to live in a Łódź ghetto.”<sup>90</sup> According to Isaiah Trunk:

It is easy to imagine the really catastrophic change that occurred in the life of these people from the moment they arrived in the Łódź Ghetto. Although in their hometowns they had also been persecuted, humiliated, and robbed, they had still not lived in ghettos. Their material conditions, in comparison with the living standard of a Łódź Ghetto, had been truly light-years away. (Trunk 2006, 307)

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<sup>81</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>82</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>83</sup> People used to burn pieces of furniture, doors, parts of fences to heat their apartments. About the internal conditions in the ghetto see Isaiah Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto*, 297.

<sup>84</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>85</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski)

<sup>86</sup> Isaiah Trunk remarked that hunger and exhaustion played a significant role in the decrease of sex life. (Trunk 2006, 300). At the same time overcrowding and promiscuity were both aggravating factors and weakened modesty and decency.

<sup>87</sup> In fall 1941 about 23,000 Western Jews and Jews expelled from the provinces were deported to the Łódź ghetto.

<sup>88</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>89</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski)

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*.

Only three people from that transport survived: most of them starved to death, part of them died from typhus, many were “resettled” quite soon because they could not or did not accept a job.<sup>91</sup> They were either too old or they thought that the war could not last for ever.

## Rumors and Information

The isolation of the ghetto was such that no information came from outside and the “Jews... Till a year before the end of the war, they did not know that people are being sent into the oven... It was said... the forty-five thousand people... it was said... they were sent to work... to the peasants.”<sup>92</sup> Rosenfeld confirmed Herskovitz’s words, in 1942 they “did not know where they were sent... we did think somehow that the children would perhaps be taken to Germany.”<sup>93</sup> Rumors and hearsay spread among the Jews in the ghetto especially in the most tragic moments or about critical topics: the deportations, the availability of food, the war. As Kuperstein observed:

The Ghetto of Łódź is an ideal social aggregate for an investigation of how rumors contributed to the creation of an emotional and intellectual atmosphere, a particular public frame of mind within a certain period of time in the ghetto's history. (Kuperstein 1973, 66).

Rumors regarding the fate of the deportees emerged as a form of psychological rationalization and collective consolation, reflecting the ghetto inhabitants’ efforts to impose meaning on an otherwise incomprehensible and terrifying reality. In a context marked by extreme uncertainty, isolation, and fear, such narratives functioned as coping mechanisms—allowing individuals to maintain hope and resist psychological collapse. Denial and selective interpretation of available information became survival strategies, deeply intertwined with the need to preserve a sense of normalcy and control. Even when fragments of truth emerged, the leadership often remained silent or ambiguous, further reinforcing a system in which rumor filled the vacuum left by official information. As a result, many clung to the belief that deportations were resettlements, rather than preludes to annihilation.

Unikowski told Boder that the Jews deceived themselves about that: after the deportation in 1942, the ghetto received thousands of kilos of radishes, “from every radish the leaves were cut off.”<sup>94</sup> The Jews thought that the leaves had been cut by the children and the old people who had recently been deported. This rumor, like others, provided a false sense of hope for the population, allowing them to endure the extreme uncertainty. However, Unikowski emphasized the brutal reality, making it clear that the deportees were not heading to fields to “pick radishes or leaves”<sup>95</sup> as some believed, but rather to their deaths. Jacob Minski, who left the ghetto with the last transport to Auschwitz, told Boder that he had no idea they were going to a concentration camp. The explanation he gave was that in the ghetto they “were actually cut off from the outside world.”<sup>96</sup> Nonetheless, there was a source of information: clandestine radios.<sup>97</sup> Brin said that there was one in the ghetto, “and we learned what was going on politically.”<sup>98</sup> Isaiah Trunk confirmed that

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<sup>91</sup> About the situation of the Western Jews in Łódź ghetto see Isaiah Trunk 2006, 309-10.

<sup>92</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17621?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Mendel)

<sup>93</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

<sup>94</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17691?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=unikowski)

<sup>95</sup> Ibidem

<sup>96</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17652?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=minski)

<sup>97</sup> Actually, there were more but probably Brin referred to the one which was still active after the liquidation of the ghetto.

<sup>98</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17595?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Itzhak&keywords%5B%5D=brin)

a group of clandestine radio listeners was active in the ghetto during the five years of its existence. Day and night they would listen by means of specially constructed sets (all regular sets had been turned over to the occupation authorities as early as December 1939) to the news from the free world and disseminate it throughout the ghetto. (Trunk 1981, 331).

The group of people who listened and spread the news had been known inside the ghetto for years but was denounced by an informer in June 1944. They were all arrested, killed or committed suicide. Trunk confirmed what Brin said about the news reaching the cleaning group in the ghetto: “the Jewish Clearance Commando (*Aufräumungskommando*) recruited by Biebow inside the liquidated ghetto in the fall of 1944 received news over a secret radio.” (Trunk 1981, 332). Julian Weinberg, who was in the same group, stressed the importance of the radio for his survival: “You must know that we had a concealed radio also in the lager. We knew, therefore, approximately how the events stood. And so three days before the liberation of the city we all hid ourselves.”<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

The interviews that Boder conducted in 1946 with survivors from the Łódź Ghetto offer a significant window into the lived experiences of Jewish individuals within the ghetto, revealing the complexity of life under such extreme conditions. These survivors, coming from diverse social backgrounds and holding different work positions, provide a multi-faceted view of the ghetto’s reality. Among them, two remained in the ghetto until its liberation, three were deported to Auschwitz during the final deportations, one was sent to various camps before the ghetto’s establishment, and another was deported to Częstochowa in 1943. Each of these individuals lost the majority of their family members either within the ghetto or after deportations, an element of their stories that highlights the trauma and widespread loss experienced by those who survived.

Despite the different paths and experiences of these survivors, common themes emerge across their testimonies—particularly regarding the chronology of events, the changing landscape and spaces within the ghetto, its organization, and the evolving social dynamics. These survivors’ accounts coincide on the major events that shaped the ghetto’s history and the persistent issues that its inhabitants had to face. The consistency across testimonies reinforces the idea that, despite the varied individual experiences, there was a shared reality that transcended personal conditions. As Boder noted in his interview with Pinkhus Rosenfeld: “It is important that we get it (information) from various corners of the world, and we get the same story.”<sup>100</sup> This remark underscores the significance of collecting testimonies from a broad spectrum of individuals: Łódź Ghetto’s story cannot be fully understood without these firsthand Jewish accounts. The survivors’ testimonies are crucial for constructing a comprehensive narrative of life in the ghetto, offering invaluable insights into how it was perceived by those who lived through it.

The ghetto itself existed in an isolated, hermetically sealed environment where traditional categories of time, space, and social organization no longer applied. Time was marked by a different calendar, often determined by Jewish holidays, which survivors referenced to help structure their recollections. Places, too, took on new meanings: the ghetto was not simply a geographical area, but a symbolic site of constant adaptation and survival. Work, as a critical part of life in the ghetto, became

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<sup>99</sup>[https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17693?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=weinberg)

<sup>100</sup> [https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection\\_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17670?u=t&keywords%5B%5D=Rosenfeld)

intertwined with the struggle to stay alive. It also transformed interpersonal relations, as the demands of labor—whether in the factories or other sectors—became the primary organizing principle of daily existence.

The Nazis' ultimate aim for the ghetto was twofold: exploitation and, eventually, annihilation. The Jewish leadership, however, was often unaware of the full extent of the Germans' plans. They did not realize, for much of the period, that their role as collaborators was pushing the Jews of the ghetto closer to extermination. Death became a constant presence within the ghetto, not only due to the brutal conditions of starvation, disease, and overcrowding, but also because of the deportations that decimated the population. People lived in an environment where uncertainty was pervasive, their futures obscured by the isolation of the ghetto and the German propaganda that sought to disguise the true fate awaiting them.

These testimonies, preserved by Boder, allow us to comprehend how the Jewish survivors navigated these horrific circumstances. They provide a nuanced understanding of how the ghetto inhabitants dealt with an unpredictable, brutal reality, where each decision could mean life or death. Through these voices, we gain a richer understanding of the psychological, social, and emotional responses to the constant presence of death and destruction that characterized life in the Łódź Ghetto.

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**Tra antiebraismo e antisemitismo:  
Contributo all'analisi della dimensione sistemica del pregiudizio cattolico  
nella nuova documentazione del pontificato di Pio XII (prima parte)**

*Between Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism:  
A Contribution to the Analysis of the Systemic Dimension of Catholic Prejudice  
in the New Documentation of the Pontificate of Pius XII (Part One)*

Tommaso Dell'Era\*

**Abstract.** This work is dedicated to exploring, in three parts, the presence of anti-Jewish prejudice and its connection with antisemitism in the new documentation of the pontificate of Pius XII made available in 2020 (and, in part, also in that from the previous pontificate). The documents analyzed in this first part concern here concern in particular the attitude of the Holy See and some of its leading figures towards the introduction of anti-Semitic laws in Poland in the period 1936-1938 and an episode involving Pacelli in Hungary in 1938. The next two parts will appear in the following issue of *Trauma and Memory*.

**Keywords:** Pius XII, Pacelli, Anti-Jewish Prejudice, Antisemitism, Catholic Church, Poland, Hungary, Ritual Slaughter, *numerus clausus*.

**Riassunto.** Il presente lavoro è dedicato ad approfondire, con una suddivisione in tre parti (le altre due parti verranno pubblicate nei numeri successivi di *Trauma and Memory*), la presenza del pregiudizio antiebraico e i suoi legami con l'antisemitismo nella nuova documentazione del pontificato di Pio XII resa disponibile nel 2020 (in parte, anche in quella proveniente dal pontificato precedente). I documenti presentati in questa prima parte riguardano in particolare l'atteggiamento della S. Sede e di alcuni dei suoi principali attori rispetto all'introduzione di leggi antisemite in Polonia nel periodo 1936-1938 e un episodio relativo a Pacelli in Ungheria nel 1938.

**Parole chiave:** Pio XII, Pacelli, antiebraismo, antisemitismo, chiesa cattolica, Polonia, Ungheria, macellazione rituale, *numerus clausus*.

L'apertura agli studiosi dei documenti del pontificato di Pio XII conservati negli archivi vaticani senza dubbio ha rappresentato un enorme passo in avanti per la ricerca<sup>1</sup>. Tra i tanti aspetti che emergono dalla consultazione di queste carte spicca certamente quello dell'impressionante e capillare organizzazione cattolica di aiuti, sostegno, sussidi nei confronti delle vittime della guerra, dei prigionieri, dei perseguitati e ricercati per le ragioni più diverse in ogni nazione, tra i quali anche gli ebrei. Nessuno storico serio può negare ciò. È tuttavia necessario avanzare almeno altre due imprescindibili considerazioni a questo riguardo. Una ricerca storica degna di questo nome non può omettere di formulare domande e interpellare i documenti: in particolare, è necessario interrogarsi sul significato storico delle nozioni di giustizia e carità, che ricorrono con grande frequenza nei documenti vaticani a proposito di tale enorme attività di soccorso; e arrivare a delimitare i loro confini evitando di sovrapporre al passato la concezione odierna della tutela e difesa universale dei diritti

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<sup>1</sup> Questo lavoro, diviso in tre parti, riprende e sviluppa ulteriormente, con la pubblicazione di documenti originali, l'aggiunta di una corposa, nuova documentazione, l'aggiornamento e la selezione della letteratura scientifica e nuove considerazioni, quanto esposto in un precedente contributo (Dell'Era, 2024). Ringrazio per i loro preziosi suggerimenti e consigli David Meghnagi, Nina Valbousquet, Federica Giordani, Emmanuelle Moscowitz, Raffaella Perin, Monika Stolarczyk-Bilardie, Sergio Palagiano, David Kertzer, Dariusz Libionka, Roberto Benedetti.

umani. Bisogna poi individuare e studiare i soggetti, i gruppi e gli individui nei confronti dei quali si esercitarono la carità e la giustizia della chiesa cattolica nella seconda guerra mondiale, tendenzialmente in risposta – è sempre opportuno sottolinearlo – alle loro richieste. È cioè necessario chiedersi quale aiuto fu fornito, in che modalità, a quali persone, selezionate secondo quali criteri. Le risposte a queste domande, oltre a richiedere una lunga, paziente e attenta ricerca storica, sono ricche di implicazioni anche solo per la ricostruzione storica della dimensione istituzionale della chiesa cattolica. E come conseguenza immediata dal punto di vista metodologico, impongono di considerare il soccorso vaticano in una dimensione polisemantica e non univoca, come un'interpretazione "ideologica" vorrebbe invece affermare.

In effetti, da questo punto di vista ciò che immediatamente emerge è il fatto che il soccorso generale fornito dalla chiesa cattolica alle vittime della guerra e delle persecuzioni fu anzitutto caratterizzato dalla priorità data ai cattolici e, rispetto alle persecuzioni antisemite, agli ebrei battezzati<sup>2</sup>. Ciò risponde naturalmente alla finalità istituzionale della chiesa e si esprime in modalità differenti (naturalmente, questo non significa che non vengano soccorsi anche ebrei non convertiti, fedeli di altre religioni o persone senza fede religiosa). Molto spesso, poi, nei confronti dei cattolici convertiti dall'ebraismo si continuarono a utilizzare termini, nozioni, immagini proprie del linguaggio persecutorio antisemita e soprattutto non fu infrequente proprio il mantenimento della denominazione ebrei per coloro che, essendo convertiti, erano invece cattolici a tutti gli effetti (esempio paradigmatico dell'una e dell'altra circostanza è la ormai nota serie archivistica Ebrei dell'Archivio della Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati della Segreteria di Stato)<sup>3</sup>. Ciò a mio parere si può spiegare sia con il fatto che una parte consistente di queste pratiche (almeno per un certo periodo) sono costituite da richieste di sostegno, segnalazione e raccomandazione per ottenere l'esenzione o l'applicazione parziale della legislazione razzista antisemita (in particolare - ma non solo - del governo italiano) o di aiuto per emigrare. E quindi, per una ragione, diciamo così, di archivio corrente e di lavoro d'ufficio i convertiti vennero qualificati sotto quella categoria perché considerati appunto tali dal regime fascista (perseguitati, cioè, per la loro presunta "razza"). Sia, tuttavia, con il fatto che in realtà è questo uno dei casi in cui si può osservare lo slittamento dall'antiebraismo cattolico all'antisemitismo. È cioè evidente come da queste categorizzazioni emerga la presenza e la persistenza di pregiudizi antiebraici intrecciati con una visione antisemita in una modalità non contraddittoria con la dottrina cattolica.

Altro aspetto che si ricava dall'analisi dei documenti secondo questa prospettiva è che l'aiuto venne rivolto non solo alle vittime, ma anche ai persecutori, in particolare quando cattolici, specialmente verso la fine del conflitto e dopo la guerra: criminali di guerra, razzisti dichiarati (come in almeno alcuni casi nel contesto italiano), collaborazionisti ecc. Si cercò pure di intervenire, spesso senza successo, per salvare dalla pena capitale sacerdoti e religiosi secondo la formula ecclesiastica "compromessi con la politica" ossia protagonisti della vita politica dei regimi fascisti (i casi sono diversi e riguardano personaggi molto noti e figure meno conosciute). E ciò in nome della stessa giustizia e carità. Interrogativi e domande sono quindi necessari per comprendere come, in questo particolare contesto istituzionale e con le dinamiche a esso proprie, quelle due nozioni possano aver dato vita a un comportamento pratico di soccorso a gruppi differenti e contrapposti di persone. Fermo restando che non è possibile prescindere dal soccorso vaticano prestato anche ai persecutori: è cioè assolutamente necessario, per un'autentica ricerca storica, collocare il soccorso fornito dalla S. Sede (con le modalità evidenziate dalla storiografia) alle vittime della persecuzione razzista e antisemita in

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<sup>2</sup> Questa posizione è stata da più parti (oltre che da chi scrive) presentata in diversi incontri e convegni internazionali sulla nuova documentazione vaticana svoltisi dal 2020 a oggi (in particolare in quello organizzato da Nina Valbousquet e Simon Unger-Alvi dal 14 al 16 giugno 2021 a Roma *War and Genocide, Reconstruction and Change: The Global Pontificate of Pius XII, 1939-1958*). Per quanto riguarda le pubblicazioni nelle quali emerge, con solide argomentazioni scientifiche e archivistiche, questa considerazione si vedano soprattutto Coco, 2023b, Coco, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Sulla Serie Ebrei oltre a Coco 2023b in una prospettiva critica di Ickx, 2021, si veda anche Kerzter, 2022; Kerzter, Benedetti, 2023a; Kerzter, Benedetti, 2023b.

Europa nel contesto generale del soccorso indirizzato anche a una parte dei loro carnefici e, insieme, alle vittime, per altre e varie ragioni, del conflitto mondiale<sup>4</sup>.

La seconda considerazione, imprescindibile e strettamente legata alla prima, è la seguente: accanto a quest'opera immensa di soccorso bisogna registrare l'indiscutibile presenza e persistenza del pregiudizio antiebraico, radicato nella struttura istituzionale della chiesa cattolica prima, durante e dopo la Shoah, in forme molteplici e diverse (sul tema si veda soprattutto Miccoli, 2007; Brice, Miccoli, 2003; Menozzi, 2014; Valbousquet 2015, 2020, 2024). Questi nuovi documenti rappresentano un'occasione unica per valutare anzitutto la coesistenza di tali due fenomeni (soccorso e pregiudizio). In secondo luogo, la nuova documentazione consente di operare una storicizzazione e una contestualizzazione del pregiudizio e di evitare la sua trasformazione in un'essenza metafisica storica. Le domande che è necessario porsi di fronte a questa documentazione sono a mio parere le seguenti: come si modificano, se si modificano, i pregiudizi antiebraici cattolici di fronte al razzismo, all'antisemitismo su base "razziale" di questo periodo, soprattutto alla Shoah ossia allo sterminio degli ebrei? Come interagiscono con il razzismo antisemita del fascismo? Che influenza hanno sull'azione concreta, su determinati eventi storici e sulla stessa operazione di soccorso? Giustizia e carità acquisiscono spesso nei confronti degli ebrei un significato particolare in cui il tradizionale pregiudizio, accanto ad altri fattori, svolge certamente un ruolo che va determinato caso per caso nella sua effettiva portata. Senza dimenticare, tuttavia, che la sua presenza e circolazione all'interno della macchina burocratica del governo centrale della chiesa cattolica come centro di decisioni e indirizzo delle politiche ecclesiastiche generali e particolari assume una rilevanza diversa da quella che ha nelle diverse situazioni locali, le quali a loro volta pure presentano una loro varietà e un notevole (e variabile) grado di autonomia.

Tutto ciò, ovviamente, si verifica in maniera molto diversa da quella che potrebbe suggerire l'immagine di una facile e per diversi aspetti falsa correlazione automatica o da quella di una spiegazione mono-causale. Il pregiudizio antiebraico non è l'unico fattore che consente di spiegare l'atteggiamento della S. Sede di fronte alla Shoah e illustrare le motivazioni del comportamento e delle decisioni assunte dagli attori storici, da Pio XII e dai suoi collaboratori. Accanto a esso (e alla sfera dottrinale e teologica) vanno considerati altri elementi che attingono a diverse e compresenti dimensioni (istituzionale-strutturale, politica, circostanziale ecc.). Allo stesso tempo, tali osservazioni non possono condurre all'eliminazione dell'indagine sul pregiudizio e sulla consistenza e caratteristiche della sua presenza in questo ambito e in tale periodo. Una parte considerevole della nuova documentazione, inoltre, consente di illuminare il "backstage" e il funzionamento degli organismi vaticani, così come di ricostruire il processo di formazione, produzione ed elaborazione di una buona parte delle carte pubblicate negli *Actes et Documents du Saint-Siège relatifs à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* e di individuarne le lacune (ossia i documenti non pubblicati, aprendo interrogativi storici del tutto legittimi sulla loro selezione). Quella che emerge, quindi, è la molteplice e variegata complessità del quadro, dove la presenza indiscutibile di alcuni elementi non esclude la presenza altrettanto indiscutibile di altri che con essi interagiscono. Ne consegue pertanto, come è stato da più parti affermato (cfr. in particolare Valbousquet 2024), la totale inadeguatezza storica della contrapposizione tra le interpretazioni pro e contro Pio XII a favore, invece, della valutazione e considerazione storica non solo della figura di Pacelli, ma anche del suo entourage, della Segreteria di Stato e degli altri organismi della S. Sede all'epoca.

Una parte considerevole dei pregiudizi nei confronti degli ebrei emerge non tanto e non solo nei documenti ufficiali, quanto piuttosto in note, promemoria e appunti, progetti, minute o bozze di documenti, annotazioni e commenti a margine dei testi, relazioni interne e copie di lavoro degli stessi ecc. Si tratta quindi di un insieme di quelli che potremmo definire "sovra-testi", quasi sempre presenti in forma manoscritta, spesso firmati con una sigla e ovviamente ricorrenti con una frequenza

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<sup>4</sup> Ho svolto queste considerazioni in un breve intervento nel dibattito al workshop *Salvati. Gli ebrei nascosti negli istituti religiosi di Roma (1943-1944). Da una fonte del Pontificio Istituto Biblico* svoltosi a Roma il 7 settembre 2023, riprendendole poi alla conferenza internazionale *New Documents from the Pontificate of Pope Pius XII and their Meaning for Jewish-Christian Relations: a Dialogue between Historians and Theologians* (9-11 ottobre 2023).

irregolare, pur se non scarsa; la loro diversa grafia consente, quando mancano le sigle, le firme o l'indicazione dei loro autori, di attribuirne la paternità (individuabile anche attraverso il loro "posizionamento" sul foglio, l'appartenenza a tipi codificati di note e ovviamente il loro contenuto). Il presente lavoro è dedicato ad approfondire, a partire dalla prospettiva appena esposta, proprio la presenza del pregiudizio antiebraico nella nuova documentazione del pontificato di Pio XII (come si vedrà e come è del resto naturale storicamente parlando, anche in una parte di quella proveniente dal pontificato precedente). L'esposizione è stata suddivisa in tre parti delle quali questo articolo costituisce la prima. I documenti qui presentati, insieme a quelli già pubblicati in precedenza da altre ricercatrici e ricercatori e da chi scrive, consentono a mio parere di individuare alcuni punti chiave di questo tema di ricerca e di formulare nuove argomentazioni al riguardo<sup>5</sup>.

## **1. Il giudaismo, «nemico secolare della Chiesa e dell'ordine sociale cristiano» e «il troppo largo influsso che gli ebrei godono in Polonia»**

La prima serie di documenti rilevanti per il tema di questo lavoro appartiene all'insieme di quelle carte che contribuiscono a definire l'atteggiamento della S. Sede rispetto all'introduzione (in questo caso una proposta) di leggi antisemite in Europa. Va subito detto che quanto segue riguarda documentazione, in precedenza solo parzialmente nota, appartenente al periodo del pontificato di Pio XI che è stata almeno in parte resa disponibile grazie all'apertura dei nuovi fondi, consentendo per quanto possibile di ricostruire l'intera vicenda in maniera sensibilmente diversa da quanto era già stato fatto, parzialmente e con lacune, in contesti non scientifici (Tornielli, 2008).

Il 9 marzo 1936 Jacob Rosenheim, tra i fondatori e allora presidente dell'Agudas Yisroel (noto movimento politico ortodosso ebraico), su suggerimento del console generale del Regno di Jugoslavia in Svizzera Sally Guggenheim scrisse da Londra una lettera in tedesco all'abate generale dei Cistercensi Frans Janssens per comunicargli il progetto di legge, in esame al Parlamento di Varsavia, di modifica della macellazione degli animali tramite l'introduzione del sistema dello sparo (modifica che di fatto avrebbe comportato la sostituzione della shekitah, macellazione rituale ebraica)<sup>6</sup>. La lettera venne portata in Segreteria di Stato dal segretario di Janssens per ricevere istruzioni sul da farsi ossia, come recitava l'appunto corrispondente, «per chiedere se sia il caso di rispondere al Presidente dell'Organizzazione Internazionale Ebraica, il quale desidera l'intervento della S. Sede per impedire che la Polonia promulghi leggi contrarie ai riti ebraici – (macellazione degli animali)»<sup>7</sup>. Un'annotazione sotto l'appunto chiudeva seccamente la questione: «Basta la presentazione della lettera»<sup>8</sup>. La missiva fu tradotta da Eduard Prettnner Cippico, addetto all'Archivio della I sezione della Segreteria di Stato, il quale nell'appunto di sintesi del documento riferiva che secondo Rosenheim il nuovo sistema di macellazione era «in contrasto colle norme religiose giudaiche e nessun ebreo oserebbe, perciò, nutrirsi colla carne degli animali uccisi in maniera così immonda»<sup>9</sup>. Dopo aver accennato alle sue argomentazioni su quanto il sistema della macellazione rituale fosse preferibile da un punto di vista fisiologico, Cippico riportava la richiesta di Rosenheim:

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<sup>5</sup> Per un primo, provvisorio, non esaustivo né esclusivo, tentativo di "classificazione" della documentazione in cui emerge il pregiudizio in alcuni grandi gruppi che riflettono temi più generali (a) la definizione e analisi teologica del razzismo come ambito preliminare connesso all'antiebraismo religioso e ai suoi sviluppi; b) l'atteggiamento della S. Sede rispetto alle legislazioni razziste e antisemite introdotte da alcuni paesi europei e a proposte analoghe; c) le conversioni; d) il sionismo e la Palestina), si veda Dell'Era, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Archivio Storico della Segreteria di Stato - Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati e le Organizzazioni Internazionali (ASRS), Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari (AA.EE.SS.), Pio XII (i documenti, pur appartenendo al pontificato di Pio XI, sono attualmente conservati nel pontificato successivo), Parte prima, Polonia, Posizione (Pos.) 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Varsavia-Giacomo Rosenheim Chiede l'intervento della Santa Sede per impedire che la Polonia promulghi leggi contrarie ai riti ebraici (Macellazione degli animali) (1936), ff. 14-22 (per il pontificato di Pio XII si segue la nuova fascicolazione che diverge da quella originaria).

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, f. 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, f. 15.

Ricorda la situazione d' inferiorità di tanti ebrei in varie nazioni e fa appello all' alto senso di carità dei cattolici, già sperimentato dai suoi correligionari parecchie volte. Termina pregando l' Abate Janssens di fargli sapere se poteva scrivere direttamente al Santo Padre per invocare un suo intervento a favore delle leggi giudaiche o se poteva bastare la presente lettera<sup>10</sup>.

Nella nota a commento della propria sintesi Cippico informava che il progetto di legge era stato approvato dalla camera bassa del Parlamento polacco (il *Sejm*) «nonostante una breve dichiarazione governativa di mons. Zongolowicz, sottosegretario all' educazione, il quale invitava i deputati a considerare con rispetto gli usi delle varie religioni»<sup>11</sup>. A quanto risulta dalla documentazione disponibile, la lettera fu lasciata senza risposta e passata agli atti. Non si trattò comunque dell' unico tentativo da parte ebraica all' epoca di coinvolgere la S. Sede per la difesa delle proprie norme religiose minacciate da quel progetto di legge. È nota infatti la missione del rabbino Prato in Vaticano del 19 marzo 1936 proprio per la questione degli ebrei in Polonia e il divieto della macellazione rituale, con l' incontro con Pacelli e Tardini, il successivo invio di un suo memoriale il 22 marzo e il coinvolgimento da parte vaticana del nunzio a Varsavia; così come il ritorno di Prato in Vaticano il 15 maggio 1938 e l' incontro con Pacelli (si vedano Toscano, 2013; Piattelli, 2013; Piattelli, Toscano, 2022).

In effetti, come è noto il tema era stato ripreso in Vaticano poco prima della nuova visita di Prato, ossia il 6 aprile 1938, quando il Card. Tisserant aveva scritto all' allora segretario di Stato Pacelli:

Ho letto in un giornale una notizia, non vista in altri, sulla cui autenticità non sarei perciò in misura di dare garanzie, relativa alla proibizione che avrebbe portata il Governo polacco contro la macellazione rituale, come vien praticata dagli Ebrei. È per loro un punto capitale, e non vi sono ragioni serie, d' igiene o altre, a proporre contro gli usi in questione. La misura, se veramente fu presa, avrebbe il carattere di vera persecuzione religiosa, non potendo esser presentata come misura di difesa del paese contro un elemento etnico sgradevole. Non converrebbe che il Nunzio ne parli? Qualunque possa essere l' odio di certi Polacchi contro gli Ebrei, mi pare che ogni persona ragionevole deve protestare in cuor suo contra [sic] tale provvedimento. E la S. Sede, che più volte in altri tempi ha protetto gli Ebrei contro misure ingiuste o molestie esagerate, farebbe, credo, un bel gesto.

Vostra Eminenza mi vorrà scusare dell' ardimento.

Le rinnovo intanto i sensi del mio ossequio, mentre baciando  
Le umilissimamente le mani mi professo  
dell' Eminenza Vostra Rev.ma  
umilissimo devotissimo servitor vero  
Eugenio Card. Tisserant<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*. In effetti il progetto di legge fu approvato, ma con una serie di emendamenti rispetto al testo originario, modifiche che comunque rappresentarono un divieto parziale della macellazione rituale. La proposta successiva di una nuova proibizione nel 1938 non passò per motivi di procedura e per la guerra. Su questi avvenimenti (la presentazione del disegno di legge sul divieto integrale della macellazione rituale nel febbraio 1936, la proposta di emendamenti da parte di Bronisław Zongolowicz viceministro per la pubblica istruzione e i culti religiosi e l' approvazione della legge così emendata nell' aprile 1936 con pesanti conseguenze su un gran numero di macellai ebrei, la mancata approvazione «per ragioni procedurali» di nuove proibizioni della macellazione rituale) e sul quadro generale delle limitazioni giuridiche dell' uguaglianza dei diritti degli ebrei cfr. Żyndul, 2001. Sulla questione della macellazione rituale in Polonia in quegli anni si vedano anche Modras, 1994, 234-238; Palka, 2006, 222-231; Rudnicki, 2008, 157-172; Plach 2015. Per l' antisemitismo nel paese nello stesso periodo cfr. anche Wynot, 1971.

<sup>12</sup> ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Parte prima, Polonia, Pos. 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione per giugulamento, prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1938), f. 9 (la chiusura della lettera rispondeva all' abituale stile ecclesiastico di comunicazione, con formule prestabilite). Nella prima parte della lettera Tisserant faceva riferimento al colloquio avuto il giorno precedente con Pacelli e gli inviava un articolo sulla situazione internazionale, scritto dalla nota giornalista statunitense Dorothy Thompson (qualificata come «un' Americana sensata») e pubblicato nella sua rubrica *On The Record*, (cfr. Thompson, 1938, conservato in Ivi, ff. 11-11v).

Questa lettera impone alcune considerazioni. Per Tisserant il divieto della macellazione rituale ebraica avrebbe rappresentato un provvedimento persecutorio senza ragione, perché si sarebbe trattato di una persecuzione di natura puramente religiosa non sussistendo gravi motivazioni di altro ordine. C'era tuttavia dell'altro, come si evince dalle stesse parole del cardinale in due punti della propria comunicazione: a) un diverso provvedimento assunto contro gli ebrei presentabile «come misura di difesa del paese contro un elemento etnico sgradevole» sarebbe stato non criticabile dal punto di vista della S. Sede, se non proprio accettabile; b) provvedimenti antiebraici contrari alla giustizia (in senso cattolico declinata) o frutto dell'esagerazione («misure ingiuste o molestie esagerate») non erano tollerabili per la S. Sede, che nel passato aveva difeso gli ebrei da esse: con ciò allo stesso tempo si avallava la distinzione tra un antiebraismo legittimo e uno illegittimo, giustificando le misure antiebraiche assunte nel passato dalla chiesa cattolica. Queste affermazioni riflettevano per alcuni aspetti la condivisione del pregiudizio antisemita (e in generale una più ampia, e all'epoca molto diffusa, concezione della nazione come caratterizzata da un'omogeneità etnica), nel momento stesso in cui proponevano la difesa degli ebrei da persecuzioni esagerate e ingiuste (accettando e giustificando, quindi, quelle considerate giuste e “moderate”). Visione, questa, non esclusiva di Tisserant, ma da più parti nel mondo cattolico avanzata perché coerente e conseguente con la dottrina e la teologia e perché consentiva di condannare alcune “tipologie” di antisemitismo mantenendo inalterato il pregiudizio antiebraico di natura religiosa non immune, tuttavia, da uno slittamento verso l'antisemitismo (come il riferimento all'etnia dimostrava).

Recatosi in udienza da Pio XI il 9 aprile, il segretario di Stato portò la questione all'attenzione del papa; ricevutene le istruzioni sul da farsi, le annotò sulla lettera di Tisserant con le seguenti parole:

Ex Aud. SSmi 9. 4. 38

Affirmative, ma con moderazione. Bisognerebbe cominciare a dire al Governo polacco: avete ragione da vendere quando volete difendervi dall'elemento semitico: ma questo modo (la macellazione) non vi può giovare; invece mettete dei limiti alla stampa e alla banca giudaica. Ma che vi giova la macellazione in un modo o nell'altro? Che gli Ebrei siano trattati giustamente e umanamente, sì, e soprattutto sensatamente, perché questa questione della macellazione non ha importanza<sup>13</sup>.

Queste parole riportavano da una parte le istruzioni di Pio XI, fatte tuttavia proprie da Pacelli, come vedremo subito, in uno spirito che andava oltre l'obbedienza gerarchica. Dimostravano, inoltre, la condivisione del pregiudizio antiebraico da parte di Ratti e del segretario di Stato con un avvicinamento significativo (se non una vera e propria sovrapposizione) verso l'antisemitismo: anche in questo caso infatti, ma in maniera molto più evidente rispetto alla lettera di Tisserant, si trattava di un'aperta legittimazione delle legislazioni antisemite, giustificate con la difesa dal pericolo rappresentato, in questa visione che richiamava direttamente il complottismo, dagli ebrei, a loro volta qualificati con un'accezione etnica («elemento semitico»), traduzione della nozione di razza allora enormemente diffusa in un linguaggio più adeguato alla mentalità cattolica<sup>14</sup>. Tale legittimazione, costituita dall'invito chiaramente formulato a imporre dei divieti «alla stampa e alla banca giudaica», trovava i suoi confini nella cosiddetta moderazione ossia nella giustizia e umanità cattolica che non escludeva la persecuzione purché si realizzasse entro i limiti stabiliti dalla chiesa ossia senza “insensatezze”, né coinvolgimento della religione (i riti ebraici). Non è inutile ricordare che tale

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<sup>13</sup> ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Parte prima, Polonia, Pos. 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione per giugulamento, prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1938), f. 9 appunto manoscritto, con grafia di Pacelli, al margine inferiore sinistro della lettera di Tisserant.

<sup>14</sup> È da notare che quest'annotazione fu scritta pochi giorni prima della lettera circolare della Congregazione dei seminari e delle università nota come il cosiddetto Syllabus antirazzista (13 aprile 1938, resa pubblica nel maggio di quell'anno, in realtà un documento minore che non costituiva una condanna del razzismo tout court, né dell'antisemitismo) e quasi quattro mesi prima del celebre discorso di Pio XI del 28 luglio 1938 in cui il papa, tra le altre cose, affrontò anche dal punto di vista terminologico la questione della razza.

indiscutibile giustificazione di leggi antisemite («avete ragione da vendere quando volete difendervi dall'elemento semitico») e di un'autentica persecuzione cattolica degli ebrei avveniva in un'Europa che in quell'anno vedeva diffondersi in vari Stati provvedimenti del genere, come accadde di lì a poco anche in Italia. Dall'altra parte quelle parole costituivano una sorta di guida e di istruzione per la compilazione del dispaccio al nunzio apostolico a Varsavia. A questo si riferiva l'annotazione, al margine superiore della lettera di Tisserant, datata 10 aprile 1938, che sembra riconducibile alla mano di Tardini ed evidentemente rivolta al minutante a ciò incaricato, che recitava: «ad mentem (girare bene)»<sup>15</sup>.

Il dispaccio di Pacelli a Filippo Cortesi del 26 aprile 1938, di cui è stata conservata sia la minuta originariamente datata 20 aprile sia la lettera originale spedita<sup>16</sup>, svolgeva appunto in una forma più ampia quelle istruzioni. Rappresenta quindi un documento che conferma l'analisi qui esposta consentendo, allo stesso tempo, ulteriori considerazioni. Così scriveva il segretario di Stato al nunzio:

Eccellenza Reverendissima,

È certamente noto all'Eccellenza Vostra Rev.ma che alcuni Governi hanno emanato severe disposizioni tendenti a limitare la eccessiva influenza dell'elemento giudaico, che viene esercitata in certi settori della società a detrimento della popolazione indigena. È chiaro che tali misure possono essere opportune e utili alla Nazione, purché siano sensatamente fondate su criteri di giustizia e vengano informate da un sentimento di profonda carità.

Secondo informazioni qui pervenute e a quanto hanno comunicato a suo tempo i giornali, in Polonia sarebbe stata introdotta una legge antisemita, la quale non permetterebbe più la macellazione per giugulamento, imposta agli israeliti dai loro precetti religiosi, e verrebbe così a impedire in pratica l'osservanza di una norma unicamente rituale.

Ora è evidente che un tale divieto non sembra certamente destinato a restringere il troppo largo influsso che gli ebrei godono in Polonia, specialmente sulla banca e sulla stampa, né pare che possa essere giustificato da motivi igienici o pratici, dato che il menzionato sistema di macellazione è tuttora ammesso in numerosi Stati. Così, per esempio, l'art. 9 del regolamento italiano per la vigilanza sanitaria delle carni dice: "Le macellazioni da eseguirsi in osservanza di precetti religiosi dovranno sempre aver luogo col pieno rispetto delle norme stabilite dai precetti medesimi".

L'Augusto Pontefice, pertanto, animato da un nobile senso di benevolenza verso tutti coloro che soffrono persecuzioni, desidera che la Eccellenza Vostra, dopo essersi assicurata sulla fondatezza delle suddette notizie, faccia presente a codesto Governo, nella forma e nella circostanza che riterrà convenienti, l'inopportunità di entrare, per gli scopi accennati, in materie a carattere strettamente rituale.

Profitto volentieri dell'incontro per raffermarmi con sensi di distinta e sincera stima  
di Vostra Eccellenza Rev.ma  
Servitore  
E. Card. Pacelli<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Parte prima, Polonia, Pos. 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione per giugulamento, prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1938), f. 9. Sul controllo dei dispacci da parte di Pacelli cfr. Coco, 2023a, 6-7. Su Pacelli si veda ora la biografia di Coco, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> La busta 298 dell'Archivio della Nunziatura a Varsavia in cui una parte delle carte qui esaminate sono conservate contiene documenti scomparsi che furono all'epoca affidati per la loro traduzione in tedesco a un docente dell'Università di Vienna, Deutsch, poi morto a Stalingrado nel 1943; nel 1957 la vedova portò le carte all'Archivio di Stato di Vienna da dove furono consegnate al nunzio a Vienna e versate in Vaticano (su queste vicende si vedano Lo Bianco, 2014, XII-XII; Carboni, 2015, 292).

<sup>17</sup> AAV, Arch. Nunz. Varsavia, b. 298, fasc. 1312, ff. 167r-168v dispaccio n. 1518/38 del 26 aprile 1938 di Pacelli a Cortesi. La minuta, conservata in ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Parte prima, Polonia, Pos. 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione per giugulamento, prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1938), f. 10r-v, presenta delle correzioni tutte recepite nella versione finale inviata al nunzio (tra queste, nella seconda frase del testo prima della parola «opportune» veniva cassato l'avverbio «perfettamente», probabilmente per «attenuare» l'approvazione delle misure antiebraiche da parte della S. Sede nel senso di non aderire a qualsiasi provvedimento del genere, ma solo a quelli basati, appunto, «su criteri di giustizia» e pervasi «da un sentimento di profonda carità»).

Dal documento qui trascritto emergono i nitidi contorni di una visione secondo cui gli ebrei rappresentavano un «elemento» diverso e irriducibile rispetto alla «popolazione indigena» dei paesi europei che introdussero legislazioni antisemite (nel caso della proposta in questione, della Polonia cattolica). La loro influenza «in certi settori della società» (banche e stampa, in Polonia in particolare) veniva qualificata, da Pacelli che faceva proprie le indicazioni di Pio XI, come eccessiva, secondo il classico schema del complotto ebraico contro la cristianità adattato all'epoca contemporanea. L'eco del lontano *Cum nimis absurdum* si coglie in queste frasi, ma saldato con la legittimazione delle leggi antisemite (emanate o proposte in diversi paesi): come si è già detto, la giustificazione cattolica di provvedimenti del genere si realizzava insieme all'indicazione (dal punto di vista di una pretesa superiorità religiosa, espressa nel presunto possesso della verità e nel corrispondente dovere di diffonderla e non tacerla, e con il sapore del paternalismo ecclesiastico) delle loro limitazioni dettate dalla giustizia e dalla carità cristiana. Le istruzioni inviate al nunzio dal papa tramite il suo segretario di Stato contenevano un chiaro messaggio al governo polacco: il fine è legittimo, ma i mezzi da utilizzare devono essere adeguati e opportuni (per raggiungere il legittimo fine di «limitare la eccessiva influenza dell'elemento giudaico» non è opportuno toccare «materie a carattere strettamente rituale»).

Come è noto, non era la prima volta che Cortesi veniva interpellato e istruito su questioni del genere o analoghe. Nel dicembre 1937, ad esempio, Pacelli gli aveva inviato, in via riservata e per averne il parere, un esposto anonimo in francese presentato anche al suo antico consigliere e poi segretario personale Robert Leiber, in cui tra le altre cose s'invitava il segretario di Stato a porre l'attenzione oltre che su alcuni pericoli incombenti in Polonia (tra i quali anche il nazismo), esplicitamente su richiesta di alcune personalità ebraiche sulla situazione degli ebrei nel paese e in particolare sul duro atteggiamento nei loro confronti di una parte del clero polacco<sup>18</sup>. Il nunzio aveva risposto all'inizio di gennaio del 1938, dipingendo una diversa immagine della situazione politica, sociale e religiosa del paese polacco e delle cause della sua crisi, riconoscendo come valide solo poche affermazioni presenti nell'esposto, ma fornendone una diversa interpretazione e individuando altrove il pericolo reale:

Un pericolo, dunque, c'è; ma proviene soprattutto dalla confusa situazione politica interna; ed ognuno vede che tocca al Governo prendere saggi provvedimenti a tempo per evitare una violenta reazione dei partiti estremi di destra o di sinistra<sup>19</sup>.

Il quadro della crisi era anzi in qualche modo collegato agli ebrei:

Non mancano certamente in Polonia i mali che tormentano ai nostri giorni quasi tutti i paesi del mondo: crisi economica, disoccupazione, comunismo, neo-paganismo; può dirsi anzi che le due nuovissime forme di pretto materialismo prendono qui un aspetto più grave in rapporto alla vicinanza dei fochi principali e diffusori ed ai numerosi nuclei di popolazione giudaica propensi al comunismo<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. AAV, Arch. Nunz. Varsavia b. 298, fasc. 1312, f. 75 lettera confidenziale n. 5115/37 del 23 dicembre 1937 di Pacelli a Cortesi (l'esposto, datato 1 dicembre 1937, è ai ff. 77-85). Su Leiber cfr. Coco, 2023a, 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XI, Polonia, Pos. 144, fasc. 173, f. 44 rapporto n. 37 del 7 gennaio 1938 di Cortesi a Pacelli (l'intero rapporto ai ff. 42r-44v aveva per oggetto *Notizie religiose, politiche e sociali a proposito di un esposto elevato alla S. Sede*, mentre la camicia in cui è conservato al f. 41 per oggetto indica *Nazismo in Polonia e notizie varie politiche e religiose*). La minuta del rapporto è in AAV, Arch. Nunz. Varsavia b. 298, fasc. 1312, ff. 86r-88v.

<sup>20</sup> ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XI, Polonia, Pos. 144, fasc. 173, f. 42. Rispetto al neo-paganesimo e alle due forme di materialismo il riferimento era ovviamente al nazismo tedesco e al comunismo sovietico secondo l'interpretazione che Pio XI ne aveva dato nelle sue famose encicliche di quell'anno.

Oltre a questo accenno, più avanti così Cortesi si diffondeva sugli ebrei:

L'A., pure parlando di tante cose, sembra principalmente preoccuparsi della situazione degli ebrei in Polonia e ne fa oggetto delle sue istanti raccomandazioni anche a nome di personaggi suoi amici di Europa e di America.

Com'è noto alla Santa Sede, la questione è veramente grave; perché gli ebrei formano almeno la decima parte della popolazione polacca, stringono nei loro tentacoli gran parte delle finanze, del commercio e delle professioni liberali, più ostensibilmente che altrove formano una casta a parte, sempre alleati delle sette antireligiose ed antisociali e propensi al comunismo. Da qui lo stato permanente di ostilità tra polacchi ed ebrei che di quando in quando scoppia in violente dimostrazioni e risse sanguinose. Poco fa, gli studenti nazionali, per non so quali incidenti, pretesero cacciare gli ebrei dalle aule universitarie, dando luogo a scene di violenza; le autorità dovettero addivenire a assegnare agli ebrei un posto nelle stesse aule in banchi separati dagli altri.

Il Governo giustamente preoccupato cerca di aprire per i giudei un varco verso l'Emigrazione, e, non essendo cosa facile trovarlo in Europa né in America, ha iniziato gestioni presso gli Stati possessori di colonie per ottenere delle terre, non a titolo di proprietà sovrana, ma di usufrutto per l'eccesso della sua popolazione.

Ed intanto, per alleviare la pressione nazionale contro il commercio, ha ritirato agli ebrei alcuni privilegi, di cui godevano, ed ha loro proibito la vendita di oggetti di culto, dalla quale ricavavano un beneficio di 80 milioni di zloty per anno.

L'agitazione anti giudaica sembra ora calmarsi; penso che, data occasione, un richiamo dell'autorità ecclesiastica all'osservanza dei principi della morale cristiana sarebbe utile ed opportuna<sup>21</sup>.

Per il nunzio la gravità della situazione degli ebrei polacchi (definita «questione») non risiedeva nell'atteggiamento della popolazione non ebraica o nelle misure adottate dal governo (peraltro Cortesi, aderendo a una visione nazionalista ed «etnicista» della nazione polacca, distingueva gli ebrei dai polacchi per sottolinearne l'estraneità al paese). Piuttosto, con un rovesciamento tipico di tale visione antiebraica, nel comportamento degli stessi ebrei descritto con gli abituali pregiudizi (predominio nella finanza, nel commercio e nella società; caratteristiche di chiusura e separatezza da casta; equazione ebrei-comunismo, atteggiamenti antireligiosi ed antisociali). Al limite il comportamento di non ebrei (appunto definiti polacchi) nei loro confronti poteva essere oggetto di un richiamo ai «principi della morale cristiana». Ciò costituiva un'oggettiva minimizzazione e giustificazione delle ostilità della popolazione non ebraica nei confronti degli ebrei polacchi e dell'operato del governo polacco con l'imposizione di restrizioni ai diritti degli ebrei. Da queste parole si può rilevare la consonanza della visione di Cortesi rispetto agli ebrei con quella che emerge dal documento di Pacelli di pochi mesi più tardi sopra riportato.

Poco più di tre mesi dopo quel rapporto di gennaio, ricevuto il dispaccio del segretario di Stato del 26 aprile 1938, Cortesi rispose con un nuovo rapporto del 7 maggio dello stesso anno:

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<sup>21</sup> Ivi, f. 44. Un'annotazione sul rapporto, datata 12 gennaio 1938, disponeva di ringraziare Cortesi, come in effetti Pacelli fece il successivo 15 gennaio accusando la ricezione del documento. Sugli eventi citati nel rapporto di Cortesi, in particolare sull'introduzione del «ghetto dei banchi» e sulla legge del marzo 1938 sulla vendita degli oggetti di culto e devozione (naturalmente in un'ottica molto diversa da quella giustificazionista del nunzio) cfr. Żyndul, 2001.

Varsavia, 7 maggio 1938.

N. 89.

Circa una pretesa legge antisemitica.

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A Sua Eminenza Reverendissima  
Il Signor Cardinale Eugenio Pacelli  
Segretario di Stato di Sua Santità

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Eminenza Reverendissima,

In riferimento al ven. Dispaccio N. 1518/38, ho l'onore d'informare l'Eminenza Vostra Reverendissima che la notizia data dai giornali, secondo la quale sarebbe stata introdotta in Polonia la legge antisemita che proibisce la macellazione per giugulamento, è inesatta.

Tale legge fu bensì discussa ed approvata alla Camera dei Deputati, ma venne aggiornata al Senato e sembra che non sarà ripresa. Essa per altro aveva in mira di sopprimere il quasi monopolio della vendita delle carni che gli israeliti esercitano, macellando oltre le esigenze dell'osservanza rituale.

Se, come giustamente osserva l'Eminenza Vostra, è da condannarsi ogni atto di persecuzione o di violenza antisemitica, non si potrebbe negare l'utilità ed opportunità di misure tendenti a limitare l'eccessiva influenza dell'elemento giudaico. Pur troppo, in Polonia neppure questo si fa in forma veramente efficace, nonostante le frequenti vociferazioni; ed il giudaismo pesa ognora più, come mi sembra, nel commercio, nella banca, negli uffici professionali; e si estende così l'azione ora occulta ed ora palese di questo nemico secolare della Chiesa e dell'ordine sociale cristiano.

Inchinato al bacio della Sacra Porpora con sensi di profondissimo ossequio mi professo

di Vostra Eminenza Reverendissima  
umilissimo, obb.mo e dev.mo servo  
+ F. Cortesi, Arciv. di Sirace  
Nunzio ap.co<sup>22</sup>

Nel proprio rapporto Cortesi riprendeva le espressioni utilizzate da Pacelli, ma, come abbiamo appena visto, in maniera coerente con quanto aveva scritto in precedenza sull'argomento e con la stessa visione del segretario di Stato. Pur non essendo stata approvata, come si comunicava, la legge antisemita di proibizione della macellazione rituale ebraica veniva comunque giustificata dal nunzio perché diretta contro quello che a suo dire era «il quasi monopolio» ebraico «della vendita delle carni» in Polonia. E a questo riguardo Cortesi riprendeva la classica distinzione tra due tipi di antiebraismo, uno antisemita, da condannare come conveniva con Pacelli, l'altro consistente in «misure tendenti a limitare l'eccessiva influenza dell'elemento giudaico». A ben guardare, in realtà, ciò che si condannava del primo tipo erano l'aspetto persecutorio e violento, mentre il secondo veniva considerato utile e opportuno. Il nunzio chiudeva con parole se possibile ancora più pesanti: lamentandosi del fatto che né le une né le altre misure venivano adottate o comunque realizzate in Polonia «in forma veramente efficace», egli tratteggiava i contorni dell'ebraismo in un quadro che grondava di pregiudizio religioso cristiano associato a quello di origine moderna, sintetizzando in un'unica immagine anche alcuni dei temi portanti della propaganda antisemita diffusa in quegli anni. Nelle sue parole l'ebraismo, significativamente definito «giudaismo», sempre più minaccioso e presente nei settori chiave della società contemporanea già in precedenza individuati, diveniva una forza agente in maniera allo stesso tempo manifesta e occulta e si qualificava pertanto come un autentico «nemico secolare della Chiesa e dell'ordine sociale cristiano».

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<sup>22</sup> ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Parte prima, Polonia, Pos. 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Legge contro la macellazione rituale ebraica (1938), f. 3-3v, rapporto n. 89 del 7 maggio 1938 di Cortesi a Pacelli. La minuta del rapporto è in AA.VV., Arch. Nunz. Varsavia, b. 298, fasc. 1312, f. 169r-v.

Come apprendiamo dall'annotazione apposta sul rapporto di Cortesi, Pio XI fu informato del suo contenuto l'11 maggio 1938<sup>23</sup>. Il successivo 18 maggio Pacelli scrisse a Cortesi assicurando di aver ricevuto il suo rapporto e precisando: «Mi sono recato a dovere di sottoporre le Sue esaurienti spiegazioni al Santo Padre, il Quale ne ha preso atto con piacere»<sup>24</sup>. La minuta di questo dispaccio, in realtà, presentava un testo differente che fu modificato (attenuato, secondo l'annotazione presente nell'originale) probabilmente sia perché ripeteva concetti già esposti in precedenza, sia soprattutto perché in quella versione avrebbe potuto essere interpretato come una “compromissione” (secondo la formula del linguaggio ecclesiastico) della S. Sede<sup>25</sup>. Tre giorni più tardi lo stesso segretario di Stato, rispondendo alla sua lettera del 6 aprile precedente, informava Tisserant del coinvolgimento del nunzio secondo quanto il cardinale francese aveva suggerito (insinuato nel linguaggio ecclesiastico) di fare per impedire la realizzazione di quel progetto di legge e gli trasmetteva una copia del suo rapporto del 7 maggio<sup>26</sup>. È interessante notare che nel testo della minuta, oltre a essere cassate le parole «di carattere strettamente rituale» riferite al provvedimento in discussione in Polonia segnalato da Tisserant, si affermava che quella misura, essendo la macellazione rituale un precetto religioso ebraico, avrebbe costituito «per gli ebrei una vera persecuzione»<sup>27</sup>. Ciò conferma quanto esposto negli altri documenti ossia che altre misure, non riguardanti la sfera religiosa e finalizzate a limitare quella che era considerata l'eccessiva presenza ebraica in alcuni settori della vita sociale, non dovevano essere ritenute persecuzioni autentiche.

Per certi versi collegato a questa vicenda che interessò la Polonia è un altro episodio, questa volta riferito all'Ungheria, in cui si possono rinvenire nuove, per la verità molto tenui anche se significative, tracce dell'atteggiamento di Pacelli verso la cosiddetta questione ebraica. Mentre nel paese era da poco terminato il lungo dibattito iniziato a marzo del 1938 che condusse all'approvazione a maggio e poi all'entrata in vigore il 29 di quel mese della cosiddetta “prima legge antiebraica” (dopo che nel 1920 era stato introdotto il *numerus clausus*)<sup>28</sup>, il 24 maggio 1938 Pacelli pronunciò un discorso in italiano al ricevimento al Palazzo delle Esposizioni a Budapest in occasione del Congresso Eucaristico Internazionale in cui, nell'ambito dell'opposizione dello spirito moderno al cristianesimo, affermò che la modernità imitava l'ebraismo nel rifiuto di Cristo con queste parole:

A questo Cristo, Verbo di eterna verità, non conosciuto, disconosciuto, calunniato, combattuto, rinnegato, alla cui parola rinnovatrice dell'anima umana l'altera civiltà moderna deve tutto quel meglio onde supera l'antica; a questo Cristo, Re dei secoli umani e divini, la nostra fede, la nostra speranza, il nostro amore elevano il trisagio di lode e di trionfo, con tanto più santo orgoglio, con tanto più incondizionata dedizione, con tanto più ardente brama di espiatione, con quanta più blasfema ingratitudine, il secolo atroce, emulo del Giudeo, Gli rifiuta e contende il regnare sopra di sé e si argomenta di crollare il suo eccelso trono di Re (Pacelli, 1939, 706)<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> «11-5-38 Ex aud. SSmi Comunicato a S. S. Ringraziare» (ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Parte prima, Polonia, Pos. 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Legge contro la macellazione rituale ebraica (1938), f. 3). L'annotazione sembra stilata con la calligrafia di Tardini.

<sup>24</sup> AA.VV., Arch. Nunz. Varsavia, b. 298, fasc. 1312, f. 170r dispaccio n. 1843/38 del 189 maggio 1938 di Pacelli a Cortesi.

<sup>25</sup> Il testo originario della minuta così recitava (si riportano tra parentesi le parole che sostituirono tutto il testo cassato apposte sullo stesso): «Mi sono recato a dovere di sottoporre le Sue esaurienti spiegazioni informazioni al Santo Padre, il quale si è degnato manifestare il suo augusto compiacimento per la non ~~mancata attuazione~~ avvenuta approvazione del suddetto provvedimento che, qualunque ne fossero state le finalità, avrebbe costituito una restrizione di carattere strettamente rituale (ne ha preso atto con piacere)» (ASRS, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Parte prima, Polonia, Pos. 186a Abolizione in Polonia della macellazione prescritta dalla religione ebraica (1936-1938), fasc. Legge contro la macellazione rituale ebraica (1938), f. 6 minuta del 14 maggio poi effettivamente inviata il 18). Al margine sinistro di questo testo era presente la seguente annotazione: «attenuare».

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. Ivi, f. 5 minuta n. 1892/38 del 18 maggio poi effettivamente inviata il 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Sulle leggi antisemite e la Shoah in Ungheria cfr. Stark, 2001; Braham, Miller, 2002; Fritz, 2021, 13-84.

<sup>29</sup> Per la minuta (dattiloscritta con correzioni autografe) del discorso, pronunciato appunto nel 1938 e pubblicato poi nel 1939, cfr. AAV, Carte Pio XII, Discorsi, b. 1, fasc. 60, ff. 1-7 *Discorso nel Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Budapest (24 maggio 1938)*. Nella versione dattiloscritta il passo citato è sostanzialmente identico. Sul fondo *Carte Pio XII* cfr. Coco 2023a (in particolare per i Discorsi pp. 71-81). Sui Discorsi di Pio XII si veda anche Coco, 2024.

Nonostante il tipico stile pacelliano ampolloso e al tempo stesso tortuoso, il messaggio, per chi l'avesse compreso al momento del discorso e poi eventualmente letto, era molto chiaro e conteneva, sempre in riferimento a quello stile, pienamente imbevuto di mentalità ecclesiastica, un riferimento alla tradizionale accusa di deicidio. In ogni caso, la versione scritta rimane a testimonianza della presenza del pregiudizio antiebraico in occasione di una celebrazione cattolica ufficiale in un paese che stava introducendo ulteriori leggi antisemite<sup>30</sup>.

La documentazione qui riportata assume una rilevanza particolare non solo e non tanto perché riferibile alla figura di Pacelli, ma soprattutto perché riflette la condivisione e diffusione della visione religiosa antiebraica presente all'epoca nella S. Sede (si è accennato sopra alla condivisione, almeno in parte, di una generale concezione e percezione degli ebrei tra Ratti, Pacelli e Cortesi) e il suo slittamento verso l'antisemitismo nell'epoca della sua diffusione europea e in definitiva in relazione al periodo della Shoah. Tale documentazione va ad aggiungersi come ulteriore contributo a quella già nota che indubitabilmente dimostra il legame esistente tra l'antiebraismo cattolico e l'antisemitismo che condusse allo sterminio degli ebrei; un legame certamente complesso che non può essere reso con l'immagine di una semplice identificazione, ma che è pur sempre esistente nelle sue forme articolate e variamente strutturate e che come tale non può essere negato.

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<sup>30</sup> Bisogna notare che quelle parole furono pronunciate da Pacelli pochi giorni dopo l'incontro, avvenuto il 15 maggio 1938, con David Prato in cui il rabbino chiese al segretario di Stato un intervento durante l'imminente Congresso Eucaristico a favore della situazione degli ebrei in Ungheria (cfr. Toscano, 2013, 87-88 in cui dal resoconto di Prato emerge anche la portata del pregiudizio antiebraico di Pacelli). Sullo stile di Pacelli cfr. Coco, 2020.

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## Introduction to Special Section: Memory, artificial intelligence and reflexive perspectives

### *Introduzione all'inserto speciale: Memoria, intelligenza artificiale e prospettive riflessive*

*Massimo Caon\**, *Edmondo Grassi\*\**, *Daniele Silvi\*\*\**

**Abstract.** The three essays of this sections, entitled “Memory, artificial intelligence and reflexive perspectives”, are briefly introduced. The article examines how memory is redefined in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), no longer a stable archive but a fragile interplay of recollection and oblivion. From oral traditions to digital media, every support that stores the past also shapes it, selecting what survives. With AI, memory shifts from preservation to production, capable of rewriting narratives and inventing new ones. Three essays address this transformation: Daria Forlenza (“Remembering the Past: AI, Archives and Black Community Representation”) explores Black British communities, archives and AI, highlighting both empowerment and risks of bias; Beba Molinari (“What Memory? Artificial Intelligence, Lucid Hallucinations and Other Errors”) reflects on algorithmic hallucinations as mirrors and amplifiers of mnemonic processes, warning of false yet plausible cultural narratives; Antonella Tennenini (“Natural Memory and Artificial Memory”) contrasts human and machine memory, stressing dangers of cognitive offloading and the need to safeguard human faculties. Together, they show that memory under AI is not a mere technical extension but a site of political, epistemological and anthropological negotiation, requiring vigilance and critical integration.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence (AI); Memory; Black Community Representation; Lucid Hallucinations; Natural Memory; Artificial Memory.

**Riassunto.** Vengono introdotti i tre articoli contenuti in questa sezione, dal titolo “Memoria, intelligenza artificiale e prospettive riflessive”. L’articolo esplora il significato della memoria nell’epoca dell’intelligenza artificiale (*Artificial Intelligence* [AI]), sottolineando come essa non sia mai un archivio lineare, ma un tessuto fragile di ricordo e oblio, continuamente ridefinito. Dalla tradizione orale agli archivi digitali, i supporti che conservano il passato non sono neutri: selezionano e modellano ciò che resta. Con l’AI, la memoria si trasforma da luogo di custodia a dispositivo produttivo, capace di generare e riscrivere narrazioni. I tre saggi qui pubblicati affrontano il tema da prospettive diverse: Daria Forlenza (“Ricordare il passato: intelligenza artificiale, archivi e rappresentazione della comunità nera”) analizza il rapporto tra comunità nere britanniche, archivi e AI, mostrando come essa possa ampliare memorie marginalizzate ma anche riprodurre diseguaglianze; Beba Molinari (“Quale memoria? Intelligenza artificiale, allucinazioni lucide e altri errori”) riflette sulle allucinazioni algoritmiche come specchio ed estensione delle dinamiche mnestiche; Tennenini (“Memoria naturale e memoria ufficiale”) mette a confronto memoria naturale e artificiale, avvertendo sul rischio di delega cognitiva e sulla necessità di equilibrio. Ne emerge una visione critica che vede l’AI come attore politico, epistemologico e antropologico nella costruzione del ricordo.

**Parole chiave:** Intelligenza Artificiale; Memoria; Rappresentazione della comunità nera; Allucinazioni lucide; Memoria naturale; Memoria ufficiale.

This section starts from a question that cannot be avoided: what does it mean to remember in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)? Memory never presents itself as a linear archive: it is rather a lacunary fabric, crossed by silences and sudden appearances, where the past continually renegotiates itself in the present. Sebald (2001) reminds us of this in *Austerlitz*, when he shows how every fragment

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recovered carries with it the echo of what remains lost, an archive of shadows that, rather than preserving the past, reinvents it, intertwining remembrance and oblivion, detail and gap. Grainy photographs, railway stations, dusty archives: everything becomes a fragment of a narrative that never allows itself to be closed. Memory, in this sense, sheds its simple psychological function to rise to the level of an inner and collective landscape, a fragile yet relentless device through which we attempt to make sense of time. From oral poetry to the bards, from rituals to libraries, to photographic and cinematic images, each age has produced its own supports to preserve what body and mind could not retain alone. Yet, as sociological studies on technoscience teach us, the medium is never neutral: in selecting, ordering, and archiving, it shapes memory itself, deciding what deserves to survive and what may be forgotten.

With the advent of Artificial Intelligence, memory undergoes an unprecedented torsion: from an intimate and bounded space of preservation to a productive device that re-elaborates, rewrites, and at times invents. The relationship that develops between human memory and its artificial double becomes ever more complex and pervasive, since generative algorithms themselves can record and preserve but, even more, generate, reassemble, and augment the narratives of the self. These nonhuman entities intervene not only in the preservation of the past but increasingly in the active construction of the present and in the prefiguration of the future, thereby problematizing the very meaning of what Benjamin (1940, Thesis VII) called «brushing history against the grain».

In this scenario, the three selected contributions address the theme of memory and Artificial Intelligence from different perspectives, offering a rich and articulated picture:

Daria Forlenza (2025), whose contribution is entitled “Remembering the Past: AI, Archives and Black Community Representation”, focuses on the interaction between Black British communities, archives, and Artificial Intelligence. Her essay shows how the Black press – and in particular *The Voice* – was a place of identity-building and resistance, and how the arrival of Artificial Intelligence represents both a promise and a risk. On the one hand, algorithmic tools can amplify the circulation of otherwise marginalized memories; on the other, archival biases and distortions risk reproducing inequalities and erasures. AI thus becomes a site of political and cultural struggle: either a tool of empowerment or a new form of exclusion.

Beba Molinari (2025), whose contribution is entitled “What Memory? Artificial Intelligence, Lucid Hallucinations and Other Errors”, concentrates on AI hallucinations and algorithmic errors as factors in the redefinition of collective memory. This phenomenon, far from being a mere technical accident, questions the very heart of memory: if remembering means reworking traces between experience and oblivion, to what extent is artificial error both a reflection—and an amplifier—of our own mnemonic dynamics? Memory here is understood not only as a data repository, but as a social process vulnerable to plausible yet false content that AI can produce and disseminate. The article calls for a critical and vigilant approach, to prevent statistical distortions from solidifying into cultural narratives, with significant epistemological and ethical consequences.

Antonella Tennenini (2025), whose contribution is entitled “Natural Memory and Artificial Memory”, adopts a philosophical-anthropological perspective, contrasting human natural memory, with its cognitive, affective, and bodily components, with the artificial memory of machines. After an excursus ranging from oral tradition to the digital age, the author highlights the risks of cognitive offloading and the reduction of critical capacity. While acknowledging AI’s potential as a support, her central thesis is that natural memory remains irreplaceable and must retain a guiding role. The challenge, then, is one of coexistence: integrating natural and artificial memory without yielding to the temptation of entirely delegating our faculty of remembering.

Taken together, the three contributions remind us that memory, far from being a stable given, is the result of an interplay of mediations, techniques, and powers. Artificial Intelligence amplifies this condition, becoming an actor that not only preserves but contributes to generating and rewriting memory itself. These three perspectives outline a shared field: memory in the age of AI cannot be thought of as mere technical externalization, but as a site of political, epistemological, and anthropological negotiation. Political, because it concerns who has a voice and who is silenced; epistemological, because it compels us to redefine the criteria of truth and error; anthropological,

because it touches on the vulnerability and resilience of the human, called to safeguard its cognitive and emotional faculties in the face of algorithmic pervasiveness.

The path we propose to the reader is thus one of critical and plural reflection, which does not limit itself to denouncing risks but also identifies possibilities: new forms of cultural archiving and transmission, tools to make forgotten memories visible, practices of resistance to programmed oblivion. If, as Ricoeur wrote, remembering always means “working” on the past, the task before us today is to understand how AI is already working on us—and how we, in turn, can critically work on it. The challenge we face is therefore twofold: to preserve the vulnerability and richness of natural memory, and at the same time critically guide the new forms of artificial memory, so that they remain tools of expansion rather than impoverishment of our common horizon.

### **Italian Translation / Traduzione italiana**

Questa sezione prende le mosse da una domanda che non è possibile eludere: che cosa significa ricordare nell’epoca dell’intelligenza artificiale? La memoria non si offre mai come un archivio lineare: è piuttosto un tessuto lacunoso, attraversato da silenzi e da apparizioni improvvise, dove il passato non smette di rinegoziarsi nel presente. Lo ricorda Sebald (2001) in *Austerlitz*, quando mostra come ogni frammento recuperato porti con sé l’eco di ciò che resta perduto, un archivio di ombre che più che custodire il passato lo reinventa, intrecciando ricordo e oblio, dettaglio e lacuna. Fotografie sgranate, stazioni ferroviarie, archivi polverosi: tutto diventa frammento di una narrazione che non si lascia mai chiudere. La memoria, in questo senso, si spoglia della sua semplice funzione psicologica per assurgere a paesaggio interiore e collettivo, un dispositivo fragile e insieme inesorabile attraverso cui cerchiamo di dare senso al tempo. Dalla poesia orale agli aedi, dai riti alle biblioteche, fino alle immagini fotografiche e cinematografiche, ogni epoca ha prodotto i propri supporti per custodire ciò che il corpo e la mente non potevano trattenere da soli. Ma, come insegnano gli studi sociologici sulle tecno scienze, il supporto non è mai neutro: nel momento in cui seleziona, ordina, archivia, esso modella il ricordo stesso, decide cosa merita di sopravvivere e cosa può essere dimenticato.

Con l’avvento dell’intelligenza artificiale la memoria conosce una torsione inedita: da spazio intimo e delimitato di conservazione a dispositivo produttivo che rielabora, riscrive e a volte inventa. Il rapporto che si struttura tra la memoria umana e il suo doppio artificiale diviene sempre più complesso e pervasivo, poiché tale gli stessi algoritmi generativi possono registrare e conservare ma, ancor più, generare, riassemblare, implementare le narrazioni del sé. Tali enti non umani intervengono non solo nella conservazione del passato ma, sempre più, nella costruzione attiva del presente e nella prefigurazione del futuro, problematizzando in tal modo il significato stesso di ciò che Benjamin (1940, Tesi VII) definì «passare a contrappelo la storia».

In questo scenario, i tre contributi selezionati affrontano il tema della memoria e dell’intelligenza artificiale da prospettive differenti, restituendo un quadro ricco e articolato:

Daria Forlenza (2025), il cui contributo si intitola “Ricordare il passato: intelligenza artificiale, archivi e rappresentazione della comunità nera”, mette a fuoco l’interazione tra comunità nere britanniche, archivi e intelligenza artificiale. Il suo saggio mostra come il *Black press* – e in particolare *The Voice* – sia stato luogo di costruzione identitaria e resistenza, e come l’arrivo dell’Intelligenza Artificiale (*Artificial Intelligence* [AI]) rappresenti al tempo stesso una promessa e un rischio. Da un lato, strumenti algoritmici possono ampliare la diffusione di memorie altrimenti marginalizzate; dall’altro, *bias* e distorsioni archivistiche rischiano di riprodurre diseguaglianze e cancellazioni; l’AI diventa qui terreno di lotta politica e culturale: o strumento di *empowerment*, o nuova forma di esclusione.

Beba Molinari (2025), il cui contributo si intitola “Quale memoria? Intelligenza artificiale, allucinazioni lucide e altri errori”, si concentra sulle allucinazioni dell’AI e sugli errori algoritmici come fattori di ridefinizione della memoria collettiva. Questo fenomeno, lungi dall’essere un

incidente tecnico, interroga il cuore stesso della memoria: se ricordare significa rielaborare tracce tra esperienza e oblio, quanto l'errore artificiale non è un riflesso – e insieme un amplificatore – delle nostre stesse dinamiche mnestiche? La memoria è qui intesa non solo come accumulo di dati, ma come processo sociale vulnerabile a contenuti plausibili ma falsi, che l'IA può produrre e diffondere. L'articolo invita a un approccio critico e vigile, per evitare che le distorsioni statistiche si traducano in narrazioni culturali consolidate, con conseguenze epistemologiche ed etiche rilevanti.

Antonella Tennenini (2025), il cui contributo si intitola “Memoria naturale e memoria ufficiale”, adotta una prospettiva filosofico-antropologica, mettendo a confronto la memoria naturale umana, con le sue componenti cognitive, affettive e corporee, e la memoria artificiale delle macchine. Dopo un *excursus* che va dalla tradizione orale all'epoca digitale, l'autrice evidenzia i rischi del *cognitive offloading* e della riduzione della capacità critica. Pur riconoscendo le potenzialità dell'IA come supporto, la tesi centrale è che la memoria naturale resti insostituibile e debba mantenere un ruolo guida. La sfida è allora quella di una convivenza: integrare memoria naturale e memoria artificiale senza cedere al rischio di delegare interamente la nostra facoltà di ricordare.

Nel loro insieme, i tre contributi ci ricordano che la memoria, lungi dall'essere un dato stabile, è il risultato di un intreccio di mediazioni, tecniche e poteri. L'intelligenza artificiale amplifica tale condizione, trasformandosi in un attore che non si limita a custodire, ma contribuisce a generare e a riscrivere il ricordo stesso. Queste tre prospettive delineano un campo comune: la memoria nell'epoca dell'AI non può essere pensata come semplice esternalizzazione tecnica, ma come luogo di negoziazione politica, epistemologica e antropologica. Politica, perché riguarda chi ha voce e chi viene silenziato; epistemologica, perché impone di ridefinire i criteri di verità e di errore; antropologica, perché tocca la vulnerabilità e la resilienza dell'umano, chiamato a custodire le proprie facoltà cognitive ed emotive di fronte alla pervasività algoritmica. Il percorso che proponiamo al lettore è dunque quello di una riflessione critica e plurale, che non si limiti a denunciare i rischi, ma sappia anche individuare possibilità: nuove forme di archiviazione e trasmissione culturale, strumenti per rendere visibili memorie dimenticate, pratiche di resistenza all'oblio programmato. Se, come scriveva Ricoeur, ricordare significa sempre “lavorare” il passato, il compito che ci attende oggi è di comprendere come l'AI stia già lavorando su di noi – e come noi, a nostra volta, possiamo lavorare criticamente su di essa. La sfida che ci attende è allora duplice: preservare la vulnerabilità e la ricchezza della memoria naturale e, insieme, orientare criticamente le nuove forme di memoria artificiale, affinché restino strumenti di ampliamento e non di impoverimento del nostro orizzonte comune.

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# Remembering the Past: AI, Archives and Black Community Representation

Daria Forlenza\*

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to explore the interconnection between black community historical memory, representation and the role of archival collections within the context of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The research stems from the need to understand the impact of AI on the preservation and interpretation of the histories of marginalised communities, with a focus on the risks and opportunities in this evolving landscape. Using qualitative methods, the study examines archival materials and the Black press, particularly *The Voice* newspaper, and its transition into digital formats, supported by content analysis. AI has the potential to disseminate historical memory more widely, creating new educational and economic opportunities for Black communities. However, algorithmic bias and underrepresentation in archival sources risk perpetuating stereotypes and restricting access to authentic narratives. This research highlights the dual nature of AI: it can empower communities by broadening representation, but it can also perpetuate inequities if not carefully managed. Therefore, ethical and inclusive approaches to AI development are essential to preserve accurate black community memory and foster collective identity in multicultural urban settings. The author also argues that strategies must actively counteract bias to support the development of a more equitable and representative digital archive.

**Keywords:** black community; historical memory; AI archive; representation; algorithmic bias.

**Riassunto.** Ricordare il passato: intelligenza artificiale, archivi e rappresentazione della comunità nera. Questo articolo indaga il rapporto tra memoria storica, rappresentazione sociale della *Black community* e il ruolo degli archivi nell'era dell'intelligenza artificiale (*Artificial Intelligence* [AI]). La ricerca nasce dall'urgenza di comprendere come l'AI influenzi la conservazione e l'interpretazione delle storie delle comunità etnicamente e socialmente marginalizzate, evidenziando sia le opportunità che i rischi. Se da un lato, l'AI può migliorare la diffusione della memoria collettiva e generare nuove possibilità educative ed economiche per le comunità marginalizzate, i *bias* algoritmici e la sotto-rappresentazione nelle fonti archivistiche rischiano di rafforzare stereotipi e ostacolare l'accesso a narrazioni autentiche. Attraverso un approccio qualitativo, lo studio analizza il caso del quotidiano *The Voice*, voce storica della *black community* nel Regno Unito, esaminandone l'evoluzione e il ruolo nella costruzione dell'identità. L'articolo evidenzia come l'AI stia trasformando gli outlet mediatici e gli archivi digitali, influenzando la rappresentazione più in generale, della diaspora africana. L'autrice sottolinea la necessità di adottare strategie etiche e inclusive nello sviluppo dell'AI, affinché gli archivi digitali possano preservare la memoria storica e preservare l'identità collettiva delle comunità migranti e della diaspora, in contesti urbani multiculturali contemporanei e digitalmente avanzati.

**Parole chiave:** *black community*; memoria storica; archivio AI; rappresentazione; *bias* algoritmico.

## 1. Epistemic Interest

This paper investigates how historical memory, identity, and representation intersect with advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI), emphasising the need for ethical and inclusive approaches to preserve the legacies of marginalised communities. It will further explain the relationship between the use of AI in digital archives, which can have both positive and negative impacts on Black communities and the construction of collective memory. While AI can help to preserve and share Black community history, it also risks perpetuating stereotypes and underrepresentation due to archival biases. Its impact also depends on the diversity of archivists and the ethical use of metadata.

In today's digital age, it is becoming increasingly urgent to understand how the historical memory of Black communities in Britain is intertwined with ethnic media and artificial intelligence. Black British identity is shaped by a rich legacy of migration, resistance and cultural expression; however, these narratives are frequently marginalised in mainstream discourse. Ethnic media outlets such as

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*The Voice* play a vital role in documenting lived experiences, affirming identity and preserving collective memory. The ethnic press in Britain has deep roots: scholars such as Duffield (1981) have traced the presence of Black Britons back to the sixteenth century, while figures like Ignatius Sancho (2013), Bacon (2007) and W.E.B. Du Bois shaped early intellectual and political discourse. The arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in 1948 and the British Nationality Act marked a turning point, prompting Caribbean publications such as *The Jamaica Daily Gleaner* and *The Caribbean News* to advocate for the integration of immigrants. Newspapers such as *The Pan-African* and, later, *The Voice*, became platforms for civil rights, community advocacy and resistance to institutional racism. Ethnic media outlets have challenged dominant narratives, promoted self-help and reflected the evolution of terminology surrounding race and identity. The ethnic press is central to Britain's evolving multicultural landscape. Digital technology offers opportunities and challenges. Democratizing access to cultural memory can also lead to exposure to commodification and algorithmic distortion, so recognising and integrating these dimensions is a cultural imperative to ensure that Black British histories are preserved, visible, and influential in shaping a more equitable digital future. Ensuring the preservation, visibility and influence of Black British histories in a digital future is a cultural imperative.

### *The Role of Ethnic Media: A Social Theoretical Perspective*

To understand the opportunities and risks of AI, examine its impact on ethnicity and memory. AI can address exclusion but risks reinforcing inequalities if not managed carefully. To prevent this, designers must deliberately consider cultural sensitivity and equity when developing these technologies (Ferrara, 2024; Latif et al., 2023). It is equally important to recognise the intertwining nature of ethnic media, and how newspapers, radio, television and digital platforms layer within urban societies, weaving together narratives and identities across generations and contexts (Deschamps, 2006).

Today's cities are characterised by cultural mixing and hybridisation, where meanings and practices continuously blend and shift through encounters between different cultures. These hybrid spaces, termed *ethnoscapes* by Appadurai (2006), are populated by migrants, travellers, professionals, and political actors, with ideas and information being generated locally and globally. Ethnic and diasporic media play a pivotal role in shaping the collective identity and social memory of minority communities, particularly in multicultural cities. The multi ethnic landscape of North America has historically been the main setting for sociologists' important research into the function of ethnic media. Building on the symbolic interactionism of Chicago School sociologists such as Park (1922), Burgess and Wirth, qualitative analysis has emphasised how urban spaces and media facilitate the negotiation of identity and adaptation. Park's work, particularly *The Immigrant Press and Its Control*, examined ethnic newspapers as reflections of immigrant life and adaptation. This concept was further refined by Sally M. Miller (1987), who demonstrated that the ethnic press expresses cultural values that are distinct from those of the mainstream media. The growth of ethnic media over the 20th century indicates significant societal shifts, offering alternative narratives and platforms for marginalised communities to participate in civic dialogue and reshape collective memory in response to changing urban dynamics. Wynar and Wynar's (1976) encyclopaedia of ethnic newspapers aided ethnic studies research. The "immigrant press" of the 1600s–1800s, which was rooted in religion, is different from the "ethnic press" of the period after 1870, which was politically charged. The latter reflected the evolving identities and aspirations of diverse immigrant groups, such as French Catholics, German revolutionaries, and Scandinavian Protestants. Migration reshaped the ethnic press, evolving it from religious roots into a tool for cultural negotiation. Despite R. Park's prediction of its decline, new immigration waves, especially after WWII, revived its relevance. Ethnic media have long reflected the experiences of minority communities in North America and later Europe. As minority groups become more visible, they can challenge dominant narratives, becoming influential in national debates. Ethnic media preserve ethnic memory, aid adaptation and maintain cultural continuity. As indicators of social change, they reflect shifting demographics and growing demands for inclusive representation in democratic societies.

Moscovici (2012) defines social representation as a framework for interpreting the world through everyday concepts, functioning as a form of 'common sense' similar to traditional myths. Hall (1997) argues that minority groups challenge dominant representations in order to contest power and reshape cultural narratives. Rather than being seen as a fixed marker of difference, ethnicity should be viewed as a dynamic process of identity construction. A. Cohen (1974; 2014) emphasised that ethnic groups are defined by shared practices and solidarity rather than origin, and that these dynamics also exist within Western societies. Anderson (2006) introduced the concept of the nation as an 'imagined community', shaped by the transition from an oral to a written culture. In this context, the press played a pivotal role in shaping national identity. Hobsbawm (2012) emphasised that symbols such as flags, anthems and emblems are central to national sovereignty and cultural loyalty. Collective memory, intertwined with individual memory, is shaped by personal experiences and cultural context, especially in Black communities where the line between personal and communal histories is often blurred in the formation of identity. Language, symbolic practices, and cultural storytelling play a pivotal role in constructing individual memory.

However, more than a century later, AI has advanced to the point where it could become the future of collective memory, so it is urgent to understand if AI is the future of collective memory, with the aim of starting a dialogue between memory studies and engineering/machine learning experts. Such an informed dialogue could benefit both fields (Gensburger & Clavert, 2024; Kollias, 2024; López-Chao et al., 2023; Hacibektaşoğlu et al., 2023). AI tools such as voice recognition software, digital storytelling platforms, and interactive archives can provide people with access to resources that enable them to explore and document their personal histories. However, ethical considerations arise as AI may oversimplify or misrepresent nuanced narratives. Artificial intelligence has the potential to significantly advance the field of history by providing richer and more concise summaries of events, figures, and movements as new background information and sources become available. The underrepresentation of historical records created by or representing people of colour, coupled with the difficulty of accessing these collections, can be attributed to systemic issues such as a lack of diversity among librarians and archivists. This lack of representation influences decision-making processes and prioritisation of archival materials. As Jaillant *et al.* (2025) have highlighted, this imbalance contributes to the contested ownership and interpretation of archives. Furthermore, the metadata associated with colonial collections often contains racist and problematic terminology, which complicates efforts to preserve and analyse these records accurately. As can be seen, the intersection of ethnicity, AI and the construction of collective memory is complex and multifaceted. This offers opportunities and challenges in terms of shaping societal structures. Traditionally, ethnicity has been understood as a shared set of behaviours, cultural norms and community solidarity. In the age of AI, however, these concepts interact in new and impactful ways. AI influences how different ethnic groups are perceived, represented and interacted with in digital spaces. AI has the potential to drive positive change by helping to identify patterns of social exclusion and offering an opportunity to address systemic inequities. For instance, it can analyse disparities in areas such as healthcare, education, and media representation. By highlighting these disparities, AI paves the way for more inclusive and equitable policies that benefit marginalised communities. However, AI also carries the risk of perpetuating harmful stereotypes or biases embedded in the data or algorithms it uses. For ethnic minorities, this creates a double-edged reality: while AI can amplify their voices and provide new opportunities, it can also exacerbate inequalities if it is not developed with careful consideration of cultural sensitivity and fairness (Latif *et al.* 2023). Cohen's analysis reframes ethnicity as a form of symbolic communication that is both socially constructed and politically active. This invites a reconsideration of who is and isn't called "ethnic", and why. He reveals that the representation of the Other is about more than just recognising difference; it is also about obscuring the cultural specificity of dominant groups by treating them as normatively neutral. This insight challenges us to question the mechanisms by which certain identities are labelled as "ethnic" while others remain unmarked and dominant. The rise of computational sciences and algorithm systems has

made it possible to translate the “ethnicity unbounded framework” into the digital and virtual world. This poses a significant risk to marginalised and ethnic minorities, as their cultural features could be perceived as different or divergent in terms of algorithmic bias. As many researchers have pointed out, the history of the computational sciences has resulted in a lack of institutional self-awareness, protecting hegemonic interests and white and male supremacy. These continue to permeate even relatively sensible research areas (Yang, 2025; Charles, 2023; Kuhlman, *et al*, 2020; Birhane & Guest, 2020; Buolamwini, & Gebru, 2018; Blodgett & O’ Connor, 2017). Algorithmic oppression is also a key issue in feminist theories that aim to address disparities in the representation of the non-western other (Hampton, 2021). This oppression goes beyond the occasional misclassification to reveal the systemic harm caused by socio-technical designs, particularly against identities that intersect, such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Hampton argues that the dominance of algorithmic systems is not just a technical issue of bias or fairness; it is rooted in algorithmic oppression, which perpetuates long-standing structures of racial, gender-based, and class-based injustice. She focuses her critique on Black feminist theory, using frameworks such as oppression, invisibility/hypervisibility and the 'double bind' experienced by marginalised individuals. Artificial intelligence frequently categorizes race in ways that reinforce stereotypes, relying on definitions shaped by political and ideological factors (Djanegara *et al.*, 2024). This neglects intersectionality and cultural nuance, risking misclassification and the perpetuation of anti-Blackness within data structures (Dancy & Socier, 2021). Bell & Bunn (2022) highlight concerns over AI-generated content undermining trust and information integrity, making it hard to distinguish authentic narratives. While AI can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce historical inequalities, it also offers promise: enhancing education, economic opportunities, and accessibility of historical memory through digital archives—if applied responsibly. The ethics of AI must move beyond correcting biased outcomes to interrogating how ontological defaults and institutional power shape knowledge structures. Multicultural media and ethnic press have long helped minorities assert identity and offer alternative narratives, illustrating the tension between dominant discourses and minority expressions of diversity (Baumann, 2006). *But what of multicultural media in the age of AI? Will they continue to be part of the social representation of minorities?*

## 2. Methodological Approach

The research combined content and discourse analysis of Black and ethnic media in Britain, and it was also possible to integrate an expert interview drawn from the broader black press environment. This approach provided a structural examination of language and representation across publications, as well as a first-hand account of editorial shifts and challenges from within the industry.

### *Content Analysis*

This involved archival work at the British Library, focusing on the Black community’s socio-historical representation through *The Voice*, first black newspaper ([www.voice-online.co.uk](http://www.voice-online.co.uk)), a key newspaper of the time. A systematic content analysis was performed on the collected materials. The representation was evaluated by conducting an analysis of pages and images from scanned newspapers at the British Library. These covered events from 1982 to 2014. The representation evolved through four distinct periods: 1982–1990, 1990–2000, 2000–2014, and the present day. These periods are connected to significant events in the integration of Black communities in London and England, which have had a significant impact on their social, economic, and cultural lives<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The writing of *The Voice* began in 1989, following riots and harassment. The 1990s saw a clash between the legislative progress made towards integration of ethnic minorities, and the social reality of incidents like Stephen Lawrence’s death and the Macpherson Report, highlighting an ongoing discrepancy between race relations legislation and society’s actual state. The beginning of the 21st century was a revolutionary period characterised by the digital revolution, which continued to strengthen in the first decade.

However, this layering is not purely technical. This chronological mapping enabled a more nuanced understanding of changes in representation, as well as the role of the media in reflecting and influencing collective memory. In the context of the black and ethnic press in Britain, discourse analysis involves critically examining language, representation and the underlying power structures that shape the production and reception of media content. It goes beyond merely cataloguing articles or events; it seeks to unravel how narratives are constructed, who controls them, and how they intersect with broader social, cultural, and political realities. To enrich the archival analysis, the research included an interview with an editor of *Pride* magazine ([www.pridemagazine.com](http://www.pridemagazine.com)), who offered first-hand insights into the evolving representation of Black beauty and identity. As a witness to the transformation of the Black press, the editor's perspective highlighted shifting editorial priorities and the enduring mission of ethnic media in Britain.

### **3. Limitations and Scope**

Unlike community-based studies involving participant observation, this research was limited to secondary sources and expert interviews due to the historical sociological aim of studying representation. Although direct linguistic integration analysis was not part of the methodology, the focus was instead on how print media, written in the national language, functions as a vehicle for the collective memory of historical minority groups. The emphasis was on the symbolic and social role of the press in shaping narratives and identity, rather than linguistic differentiation. In summary, the study's methodology combined archival research, systematic content analysis and expert insights to trace the historical and representational evolution of ethnic media. The research applied a framework widely used in ethnic media studies to evaluate the historical impact of *The Voice*. Founded in the early 1980s, *The Voice* has operated as both a news outlet and a key social institution for Britain's Afro-Caribbean community. While it may not fit the traditional definition of a guiding institution, it holds significant 'ethnic' value (Forlenza, 2018) by shaping the evolving social representation of Black British identity, rather than through language transmission. Drawing from social representation theory, this process involves objectification and personification, publishing stories and imagery that crystallise collective meanings and values. Through language and discourse, *The Voice* embeds these images in the public consciousness, acting as a living archive. As these representations circulate in society, they challenge dominant narratives and help redefine what is accepted as 'common sense' in civil discourse.

### **4. Discussion**

#### *1982-1990: The Voice and the Rise of Black British Media Advocacy*

The launch of *The Voice* in 1982 was a significant moment for British ethnic media. The newspaper's editorial mission was clear: to serve the black community in London and the wider population by promoting a vision of the city that embraced multiculturalism. The newspaper positioned itself as an advocate for educational progress, business awareness and human rights, with the aim of uniting rather than dividing. Through personalised reporting, such as its coverage of the Siddiq family's experience of racist violence in Waltham Forest, *The Voice* became a voice for community concerns, resisting the stereotypes perpetuated by the national media. Its coverage of the Brixton riots of 1981 further showcased *The Voice's* alternative narrative. Rather than focusing solely on disorder, the paper highlighted the resilience and cultural vibrancy of Brixton's Afro-Caribbean

community. The lived experience and internal perception of residents were foregrounded, creating a sense of solidarity and self-help in the face of adversity. Between 1982 and 1990, the newspaper was the voice of the Afro-Caribbean community, subverting the dominant representation — the shifting of meaning — as defined by S. Hall (1997). It also contested the perception of public space and attempted to influence public opinion by circulating new representations to deconstruct racial stereotypes.

### *1990-2000: Shifting from Racial to Ethnic Discourse*

The discourse shifted from 'racial integration' to 'ethnic diversity', driven by the growth of multiculturalism. The emergence of terms such as 'BME' (black and minority ethnic), 'cultural diversity', and 'ethnic minorities' in editorial and advertising content indicated a new framework for public discourse. The press became a platform for challenging institutional racism, as evidenced by articles on discrimination in healthcare and commemorative events such as the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. At times, the language was more radical, fostering critical awareness and urging systemic change. The 1990s saw a transition in terminology and focus, reflecting broader social change. Terms such as 'cultural diversity', 'ethnic minorities', and 'BME' (black and minority ethnic) became commonplace in advertising and employment notices, signalling new approaches to inclusion and representation. During this period, *The Voice* played a pivotal role in exposing institutional racism, particularly within the medical sector and public services. The murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent inquiry brought national attention to systemic discrimination, and *The Voice* distinguished itself through a radical, inward-looking critique. Articles emphasised the importance of community awareness, noting that lasting change required ongoing vigilance and lifelong learning.

#### 2000–2014: Crystallisation and Convergence

By the early 2000s, *The Voice* had become a well-established institution and a recognised representative of the black community. Its role had evolved beyond advocacy to encompass the deconstruction of standardised images of migrant communities and the promotion of nuanced alternative representations. The terminology continued to evolve, with 'racism' itself becoming a loaded term that was often used in quotation marks to highlight its contested status in public discourse. The discourse centred on themes of recognition, representation and institutional visibility. The range of voices expanded, and the press assumed a dual role of maintaining its identity as a community advocate while engaging more directly with national debates on diversity and inclusion. Language became more nuanced, sometimes negotiating taboos — such as the use of quotation marks around 'racism' — and highlighting the tensions between aspiration and reality, particularly regarding representation in the media and public institutions.

### *2014 to the present: From Print to Digital*

From 2000 to 2014, the newspaper underwent a further change, transitioning from an ethnic to a multicultural publication. This was due to the content reflecting the growing migrant communities, with contemporary representations embracing the cultural diversity of these communities. During this period, *The Voice's* identity became more defined. It became the ordinary voice of the black community, acquiring social recognition based on its historical background and settlement. The newspaper also gained political and public visibility, becoming part of the wider national media landscape and circulating social representations that aimed to deconstruct the standardised image of migrant communities. Since 2014, *The Voice* has undergone significant changes due to the digital transformation of the media. It evolved from a printed multicultural platform into a digitally adaptive and socially engaged media outlet that uses websites, social media, podcasts and online archives to reach a wider audience. This has enabled *The Voice* to connect with a younger Black British audience. However, the digitisation of news production and archiving has made it more difficult to see, represent and understand the past.

## 5. From Advocacy to AI

The discourse analysis has revealed that the Black Press plays an important role: (a) centring individual stories and direct testimonies. This creates counter-narratives to the stereotypical depictions in the mainstream media, reshaping public perceptions and fostering empathy. (b) challenging the dominant representations of minority communities. This was evident in its coverage of riots, discrimination and cultural achievements, where alternative interpretations were foregrounded. (c) introducing new terms for understanding identity and belonging. The ethnic press played a formative role in normalising these terms within public discourse. (d) Institutional critique: Editorials and news features often highlighted institutional failures in areas such as policing, healthcare, and media employment. The discourse was characterised by demands for greater accountability, diversity, and reform.

According to an expert in Black mainstream media, these outlets have long offered spaces for self-expression, cultural affirmation and celebrating achievements that are often overlooked elsewhere. Popular content ranging from hair and beauty to relationships and role models demonstrates the ongoing importance of culturally specific representation. As AI becomes more embedded in media production, the Black press faces opportunities and risks: while AI tools could amplify diverse narratives and democratise representation if they are designed with cultural sensitivity and community input, there is a risk that they could perpetuate exclusion if they are trained on biased data. Algorithms that privilege Eurocentric norms or mainstream content could dilute the distinctive voice of the Black press. The expert stresses the need for culturally competent AI development, transparency, and community oversight to ensure that technological innovation strengthens rather than undermines the mission of Black media. In this digital age, the Black press is still vital in challenging stereotypes, preserving authentic narratives and ensuring that Black communities are seen, heard and celebrated. Finally, the interview emphasises the ongoing significance of the Black press in the UK as a vital platform for representing women of colour, young Black Britons, and for challenging the lack of diversity in mainstream media.

Perspective of research *The Black press* in Britain has evolved through five distinct historical phases, each of which is deeply rooted in migration, activism, and the perpetual battle for recognition. Its earliest traces can be found in the Elizabethan period, when figures such as Ignatius Sancho represented Black intellectual life. In the late 19th century, the rise of Pan-Africanism led by thinkers such as Henry Sylvester Williams and W.E.B. Du Bois established a networked print culture that advocated for civil rights and forged transnational ties. Following the arrival of Afro-Caribbean communities after the 1948 Windrush migration, outlets such as *The West Indian Gazette*, founded by Claudia Jones, grew in number. These outlets gave voice to political aspirations and cultural identity. During periods of racial tension and institutional exclusion, particularly following the 1958 riots, the Black press amplified community perspectives and mobilised action. Today, the landscape has shifted dramatically with the advent of artificial intelligence. AI offers powerful tools for analysing data, creating content and expanding outreach, enabling ethnic media outlets to preserve and share their narratives on an unprecedented scale and with unparalleled efficiency. However, as the Black press navigates this digital terrain, it must ensure that AI becomes a tool for empowerment rather than erasure.

This article highlights the urgent need to expand the scope of research into the *Black press*, both historically and in relation to new technologies such as AI. A richer research approach could reveal the multifaceted role of the press as a site of resistance, a shaper of community identities and a mediator of change in super-diverse societies. By critically examining editorial strategies, audience engagement and shifting representations, scholars can better understand how the *Black press* has challenged dominant narratives and fostered new forms of belonging. The arrival of AI makes this line of enquiry even more vital. Algorithmic decisions, which are often opaque and data-driven, can subtly distort archives, misrepresent community experiences or privilege mainstream voices. This threatens the continuity of collective memory. Projects such as the *Griot and Griots Project*

(<https://griotandgrits.org>) are emerging as innovative responses to these challenges. This open-source initiative, developed in collaboration with cultural experts, educators and institutions, uses AI and digital technologies to preserve *Black history* and stories that would otherwise be lost. Using culturally sensitive approaches and community engagement in content curation, the project aims to safeguard the richness of *Black experiences* in an increasingly digitised world. In this pivotal moment, the *Black press* and its advocates must champion research that interrogates both the possibilities and pitfalls of AI. This means scrutinising not only the technology itself—its algorithms, data inputs, and outputs—but also the cultural frameworks and power relations shaping its adoption. Only through such a comprehensive and critical perspective can the *Black press* continue to fulfil its historic mission: championing representation, fostering resilience, and ensuring that the stories and achievements of Black communities are preserved and celebrated for generations to come.

## 6. Conclusion

As AI becomes central to media production and archiving, the *ethnic press* must navigate its dual potential of amplifying diverse voices while resisting algorithmic bias and editorial erasure. The author emphasises the importance of ethical and inclusive design, as well as culturally sensitive frameworks, to safeguard collective memory and ensure minority narratives remain visible, authentic and empowering in the digital age.

By embracing AI as a tool for content analysis, outreach and advocacy, while guarding against algorithmic bias and a loss of focus, ethnic media outlets can continue to be a powerful force for representation and empowerment in an increasingly complex and super-diverse society. AI could lead to a new common sense that differs from the current one. The meaning of representations is negotiated between those provided by the media, historical knowledge, and everyday knowledge. While automated systems offer opportunities such as content discovery and enhanced engagement, they also pose risks such as reinforcing biases or misrepresenting architectural heritage. It is important to scrutinise modelling choices, architectural patterns, and code-level decisions for implicit assumptions or discriminatory tendencies because bias is systemic, not accidental (Shukla, 2025). Addressing longstanding gaps in representation within traditional archival systems requires a comprehensive approach that scrutinises the frameworks and methods determining what is preserved and how it is presented. Integrating Black feminist theories enables archivists to prioritise narratives that highlight the creativity, resilience, and societal impact of Black women, thereby fostering more equitable representation in archival collections.

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# What Memory? Artificial Intelligence, Lucid Hallucinations and Other Errors

Beba Molinari\*

**Abstract.** This article aims to investigate how the very concept of memory can be influenced by algorithms, with a particular focus on the different ways in which a whole series of errors produced by Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be encountered. These errors take various forms, ranging from extremely obvious manifestations to much more subtle ones that are difficult to recognize, foremost among which are those commonly known as lucid hallucinations. The latter, in particular, can have a clear influence on the construction of memory, just as in the early 1980s, new electronic external storage media affected not only memory but also the concept of memory itself.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Lucid hallucinations, Error, Memory.

**Riassunto.** *Quale memoria? Intelligenza artificiale, allucinazioni lucide e altri errori.* L'articolo si propone di indagare come il concetto stesso di memoria possa essere influenzato dagli algoritmi, con particolare attenzione alle diverse modalità con le quali si possono riscontrare tutta una serie di errori prodotti dall'Intelligenza Artificiale (*Artificial Intelligence* [AI]). Tali errori si presentano in diverse forme, sia palesandosi in modalità estremamente evidenti, sia in forma molto più subdola, di difficile riconoscimento prime tra tutte quelle più comunemente conosciute come allucinazioni lucide. Queste ultime in particolar modo possono influire in modo evidente nella costruzione del ricordo, così come nei primi anni Ottanta del secolo scorso i nuovi media elettronici di memorizzazione esterna hanno inciso non solo sul ricordo, ma più in generale sul concetto di memoria stesso.

**Parole chiave:** Intelligenza artificiale, Allucinazioni lucide, Errore, Memoria.

## 1. Introduction

Several times a day, we are led to remember an event, sometimes simply as a causal link to some stimulus that triggered the memory, other times because it is necessary to understand today's events, which require a higher level of understanding and not just a simple interpretation of the facts that occurred in the immediate past. The cultural nature of the concept of memory itself is therefore evident, understood not only as purely linked to the individual, as an internal processing of an event experienced and therefore of a purely physiological cerebral nature, but rather as a reworking through a series of other external (variable) factors that affect memory, i.e. conditioned by other social and cultural events (Halbwachs, 1968).

This article aims to investigate how the very concept of memory can be influenced by the algorithms underlying Artificial Intelligence (AI), with a particular focus on the different ways in which a whole series of errors produced by AI can be encountered. These errors take different forms, ranging from extremely obvious to much more subtle and difficult to recognise, foremost among which are those commonly known as lucid hallucinations. The latter in particular can have a clear influence on the construction of memory, just as in the early 1980s, new electronic external storage media had an impact on memory itself.

If we look to the future, we are led to believe that we are living in a period of cultural revolution, just as printing and, before that, writing changed the perception of events and had a strong influence

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on collective memory. We cannot help but think that today, through new media and, even more so, AI, we are in a period of great technological ferment linked to increasingly innovative and high-performance forms of communication. The acceleration of digital technology has taken place over the last ten years and, without us realizing it, has conquered our daily lives by simplifying the resolution of increasingly complex and specific questions with the help of a growing number of practical applications, most of which are based on AI (Thottoli, 2024).

The author is fully aware that the concept of memory cannot be explained solely through the changes brought about by media technologies (Luhmann 1990), but at the same time she does not believe that the only interpretative key can be traced back to historiographical and spiritual events, espousing Weber's theory (1922) first and foremost with the general concept of culture, followed by Jaspers in his personal conceptualization of history (1949). In this regard, AI offers a range of opportunities that are currently unexplored, allowing us to perform multiple tasks of varying complexity, but at the same time, the general public is unaware of the procedures and methods by which AI operates with great adaptability on our devices. Being aware of the types of errors AI can make allows us to develop a set of antibodies that help us understand critical thinking and co-construct collective memory.

But what is the relationship between AI and memory? It is necessary to clarify the many faces that AI can take. Machine learning is based on data produced by our interactions with the web environment. Our digital traces, produced consciously but in most cases unconsciously, feed machine learning. It is therefore necessary to shift our attention to the latter and the definitions that derive from them, but it is equally essential to understand which of the many different definitions of AI is the most appropriate to adopt. We are not dealing with an exact science, but rather with predictive models that lay the foundations of machine learning and which, precisely because they are predictive, are subject to possible distortions (bias).

In this regard, it is essential to make a clarification that lays the foundations for this article. While we have a series of assumptions on which the methodology of social research useful for understanding various social phenomena, including memory, is based, we must also ask ourselves how many of these assumptions are still valid given the immense amount of information and data provided and analyzed by the internet, shifting the focus to the data used by AI.

In this process of constructing and reconstructing memory, AI skills will become increasingly effective, particularly in terms of becoming ever closer to human skills. We are already at the stage where AI is able to navigate complex systems and understand its environment, relate to what it perceives and solve problems accordingly. That is why it is no longer so much a question of representativeness; the boundaries are already extremely blurred because they are extremely fast, changeable and have a level of continuous implementation that is difficult to even imagine.

The following paragraphs will explore aspects related to AI and its many facets in order to define its boundaries of interest with regard to its impact on collective memory and how new forms of communication can intervene in the process of co-constructing memory. Subsequently, the limits of AI use will be discussed through an in-depth analysis of the different forms of error that machine learning can reproduce.

## **2. From Artificial Intelligence to Memory**

The art of memory has always been linked to the individual. Even in the earliest writings dating back to the 1st century BC, a distinction was made between natural and artificial memory, linking the latter to rhetoric, a concept that was never forgotten and was taken up again in the 17th century by

the cultural historian Frances Yates (1968). Many others followed, including Blum (1969), Eickelmann (1978) and, more recently, Assmann and Harth (1991), continued Yates' studies, albeit with different meanings. However, in this case, it is not so much the focus on the individual that is of interest in the field of AI, but rather a broader view of the community (Bauman, 2007). The idea of educating people to remember is strongly linked to the overlapping of multiple pieces of information of different natures and origins in which we live. It is therefore necessary, if not essential, to understand what stimuli lead a community to create and/or co-construct a true 'culture of remembrance'.

There is a great deal of ambivalence surrounding the concept of AI itself, depending on the field and/or studies in which it is approached. AI is aimed at simulating human behavior, designed with anthropic capabilities such as reasoning, learning, planning and creativity. AI adapts quickly to its surroundings, relates to what it perceives, solves problems and acts towards a specific goal, all through a process of receiving data (already prepared or collected via sensors, such as a video camera), analyzing it and providing an output with responses it deems appropriate. AI systems are able to adapt their behavior by analyzing the effects of previous actions and working autonomously.

More specifically (European Parliament, 2020), AI is divided into two broad macro areas: software and embedded intelligence. The former includes virtual assistants, image analysis software, search engines, facial and voice recognition systems, while the latter includes robots, autonomous vehicles, drones and the Internet of Things. While the former are those we use most commonly in our everyday lives, the latter are those we initially refer to as AI<sup>1</sup>.

Let's take a look at how AI actually works, albeit in broad terms. What we usually see and interact with when we deal with AI as users is a chatbot (Xu, 2019). This is software that simulates and processes human conversations, whether written or spoken, in order to allow users to interact with digital devices while giving them the impression that they are communicating with a real person, thus facilitating human-machine interaction. Chatbots vary depending on how they are programmed. Some are extremely simple and respond to a single question and/or on a single topic, while others are much more complex, such as digital assistants that learn from their mistakes and from data provided by the web in order to provide increasingly personalized levels of service that reflect the user's interests. To give a concrete example, we could program a chatbot in the guise of a famous historical figure and be able to talk to Michelangelo, Hitler, Queen Elizabeth, etc.

Apart from the purely ethical aspect, which is by no means negligible, chatbots must be trained before they are able to respond<sup>2</sup> and it is at this stage that Machine Learning comes into play (Liu, Wang, Whang, 2012) comes into play, through which the model underlying the chatbot learns through a huge amount of data of various kinds (text, images, videos) that are provided free of charge and directly from the web without any type of filter.

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<sup>1</sup> While most people do not have a clear idea of what AI is, they are certainly surrounded by it in their daily lives, providing useful data for processing a range of information that changes our lifestyles: dietary, relational, educational, cultural, etc. We are talking about an amount of information that is difficult to even imagine, from a total of 33 zettabytes in 2018 to an estimated 175 zettabytes by the end of 2025, where one zettabyte is equivalent to a thousand billion gigabytes. With this amount of data, it is difficult to imagine a repository that could contain it all.

<sup>2</sup> The learning phases are divided into three successive steps: the first involves learning linguistic skills and general knowledge, and by learning from its mistakes, the chatbot becomes autonomous in its ability to give correct answers, but only with regard to linguistic competence. In this phase, the programmer comes into play, 'adjusting' the errors made by randomizing the correct words and using a predictive process formulated as a 'learning model'. In the second step, the chatbot learns specialist skills through a series of multiple-choice questions, for which the model formulates tasks. In the third and final step, a team of computer scientists verifies the effectiveness of the responses and defines the 'style' and genre with which the chatbot responds.

Once the chatbot software has been trained, there is no need for the program to be constantly connected to the network. It will still function, providing the most reliable response possible based on previously acquired information, but it will not receive the continuous data updates that allow it to ‘train’ its skills in relation to specific questions.

It is important to emphasize that AI and Machine Learning are not synonymous. They are two closely related but completely different technologies. The former designs an intelligent architecture, while the latter allows us to develop a learning system with ease.

What has been described so far is an overview that does not claim to be exhaustive, but aims to show a variety of extremely innovative tools that are, at the same time, always different and changing. There are several noteworthy tools related to the culture of memory, understood as the direct evolution of chatbots. The most interesting are undoubtedly those that fall within Information Retrieval (Kruschwitz, Petrocchi, Viviani, 2025), i.e. a set of Machine Learning techniques used to manage different aspects, including the representation, storage, organization and access to objects containing information such as documents, web pages, online catalogues and multimedia objects. Information Retrieval aims to provide users with the information they have previously searched for, already providing an initial selection of topics that it considers most relevant. Unlike other more common chatbots, those used in Information Retrieval make use of platforms that provide detailed analyses from historical archives, scientific and journalistic articles, official statistics, etc.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of all this is a system based on Machine Learning: the more it is used, the better the performance and accuracy of the information provided by the AI, regardless of the platform or chatbot used. However, it is important to be aware that machine learning systems are not all the same. Some are based on artificial neural networks, i.e. models that mimic the human brain, and when the question asked becomes complex, the neural network needs a so-called deep network, which is where deep learning comes into play (Abadi, Chu, Goodfellow *et al.*, 2016): the greater the problem to be solved, the more complex and deeper the network will be. This complexity stems from the fact that everything we see is actually ‘assembled’ by our brain, which has been trained since childhood to recognize things and attribute the right meaning to them by placing them in a well-defined context, effectively using memory. We must therefore be aware that Deep Learning simulates this process. The key point is that we have now reached a situation where, given a multitude of layers, the model is able to learn by itself (Thompson, Greenewald, Lee *et al.*, 2020). It is in this context that errors that can be made by AI and how these errors can change cultural memory come into play.

At this juncture, it is natural to think about the concept of natural and artificial memory. AI represents both, because on the one hand, Deep Learning simulates the human brain in its process of understanding and in its mnemonic aspect, while on the other hand, the use of AI can influence, as with traditional media tools, the vision of a collective memory.

There are therefore several aspects that remind us of the link between AI and the concept of memory. Conscious use of new digital tools can easily become testimony, but this does not mean that

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<sup>3</sup> First and foremost among these are GPT technologies, which are the new frontier of research, albeit still under discussion and undergoing continuous updating. Among these, one of the first to be available for free is Google Studio IA, which aims to create prompts tailored to our needs, such as a specific professional figure who responds to a series of skills and, through these, provides answers to solutions in specific areas.

The second free tool is NotebookLM, a retrieval system with algorithms that use only data of interest to us, such as PDF documents, so the system will only document sources that we have previously entered. The platform’s response is to provide us with a summary, or a timeline, a briefing document, posts to be included in social networks, reports, etc. In other words, it processes content and returns it in a new lexical form. Among other things, there is also the possibility of subsequent dialogue with a chatbot. The best known, most downloaded and most used in Italy is undoubtedly ChatGPT, which aims to provide the most accurate and contextual answers possible, improving interaction with users and supporting human work. We also have the option of creating our own virtual agents using content chosen directly by us.

such testimony is necessarily a point in favor of the collective memory process; it could also turn into a point against it. Access to a flood of uncontrolled information can alter the message conveyed by the chatbot and/or the platform used. In this case, we enter fully into the realm of possible errors that can occur when using Machine Learning, which we will discuss in the next section.

There is another noteworthy aspect, namely the form of language that could be used by the chatbot. Language is ‘taught’ or, rather, programmed by the computer scientist, and it is not certain that this form of language will not change over time, just as language changes in society.

Obviously, there is a link between AI and memory that has not yet been considered, the most obvious being AI as a repository, as a simple large container of information to draw on when needed, just as we do with our memory. However, we are dealing with an issue that is as obvious as it is evident in its human-machine connection. As a simple repository, it does not make much sense, because there are no specific selection criteria, whereas social actors draw on their own experiences, acquired cultural skills and their perception of the self and the other.

According to Halbwachs (1956, p.79) ‘*There is no memory possible outside the frameworks that people living in society use to fix and retrieve their memories*’. The premise of this assumption is that the social actor draws on their own memory, constructed through their personal experiences in the culture and group to which they belong, a sort of cultural ‘filter’ dictated by living in a community. While AI once disregarded this aspect and stopped at indiscriminately searching for useful information through a predefined algorithm, today the research on which the algorithm is based is much more sophisticated and requires a series of ‘filters’ on which the algorithm processes the data.

### **3. Lucid Hallucinations and Other Errors**

In order to highlight the many errors we may encounter along the way, it is essential to understand not so much the mechanisms underlying the analysis, or rather the algorithms used by AI, which are not the responsibility of the individual or the community and/or group to which they belong, but rather of the programmer; Rather, we should not underestimate the fact that there are different platforms and chatbots, some more effective for certain uses than others, and that, above all, some AI tools use Deep Learning, algorithms based on more purely predictive neural networks, which change the algorithms underlying the analysis at an impressive speed (Quarteroni, 2020).

In order to eliminate the possibility of risk with regard to ‘false’ information, social actors should have solid IT and mathematical skills. It is therefore almost impossible to have both skills and, on the other hand, to be able to devote the time necessary to verify information as it is conveyed. The very fact that every single piece of information has to be verified renders it useless. However, AI allows us to analyze online contexts, opening up new areas of interest, so the focus shifts to our ability to identify errors.

It is worth noting that there is no single type of error. There are systematic errors, more commonly known as distortions, accidental errors, selection errors, and errors made during indication, operationalization, selection and observation. In fact, these errors are purely related to so-called traditional analysis, and in other contexts it has been repeatedly discussed that error, in its various meanings, is an aspect that is very often overestimated in the social sciences, especially when it comes to sampling (Molinari & Corposanto, 2022). If we think about error from a mathematical, statistical and/or probabilistic point of view and if we think we can ‘control’ it using AI, we are making another mistake. These are completely different realities, two different epistemological points of view.

Having said that, when we talk about bias, we tend to attribute a purely negative connotation to it, but this is not always true; in fact, unexpected influences should not always be perceived as ‘errors’,

i.e. ‘mistakes’ that contaminate the quality of the recorded information and therefore render the information itself unusable. Instead, we could think of bias as a space-time continuum, in which possible distortions can effectively alter the quality of data to varying degrees and, in some cases, allow us to discover new aspects that had not been given much weight, opening up new interpretative scenarios (Shapin, 1982). Obviously, upstream of the process, there must be strong social skills related to the historiography of the area of interest and a critical capacity of a geopolitical and cultural nature. The latter aspect is strongly anchored in the real life of the social self of the individual, who recognizes certain objects and places as status symbols of specific contexts, becoming social facts (Appadurai, 1986).

In this regard, it is easy for data from the web to be influenced to varying degrees by distortions that we can distinguish into two macro categories: on the one hand, we may encounter errors due to discriminatory criteria that are inadequate for the task at hand; in other cases, however, biases derive from Big Data and the Data Warehouses themselves, which AI draws on to carry out its processing (Burrows & Savage, 2014). The latter type of error is much more difficult to identify as it requires sector-specific IT and mathematical knowledge.

Therefore, the processing that arises from user requests regarding certain phenomena that occurred in historically significant contexts (wars, epidemics, traumatic events, etc.), as we remember and interpret them today, is still the result of a collective memory that derives from the combined memory of the members of a social group. Memory is the processing of multiple aspects, personal, lived experiences, stories told by loved ones, what we have learned from the media, so we rework a memory with respect to a series of ‘other’ variables that intervene in the process of remembering from our earliest socialization. In fact, taking this a step further, we could say that the processing carried out by Machine Learning is nothing more than a series of data (information) from the web in other contexts and for other purposes of analysis, i.e. the famous digital traces, which represent our online preferences, experiences, events, etc., with all the strengths and weaknesses that come with them.

To better understand what has been discussed so far, let’s take a closer look at the most widely used BOT in recent times, which is not only downloaded and present on our mobile phones with an average of 1.6 billion visits per month in 2025, but is also used by users approximately every 7 minutes. We are talking about ChatGPT (Cong-Lem, Soyooof & Tsering, 2024). Unlike many other BOTs, the latter has the advantage of not requiring any kind of preparation, does not need to be implemented with information, and does not need to be trained on specific documentation. Asking a question about a specific historical event, such as a war, does not lead to errors because it is documented on multiple platforms, but the situation becomes more complicated when a higher level of specification is required, with the question also involving historical and cultural analysis, such as a diaspora. It is precisely in these situations that the most serious errors occur, some of which are extremely obvious as they are subject to various types of discrimination. These issues arise because, as there is no real control over the origin of the information processed by the BOT, the output is not always impartial.

To reduce this problem, it is possible to use a different tool, namely a BOT created and ‘trained’ by us through limited use of web-based ‘ ‘, asking it to explore topics only in relation to a series of documents and articles provided exclusively by the user.

The biggest obstacle currently limiting the use of AI, especially generative AI, is what are known as AI hallucinations, a phenomenon that occurs when the output generated is incorrect, but not so much so as to be obvious (Spennemann, 2023). The underlying problem is that in a state of hallucination, a plausible, comprehensive, effective, clear, but above all logical response is provided that is completely unfounded in reality. This is mainly due to several factors, in particular overfitting, i.e. when the machine learning model ‘feeds itself’ by reprocessing information on data already

processed by AI, introducing into the analysis what is statistically referred to as ‘noise’ within a dataset. On the other hand, when we think about memory in the real world, we must consider that it is maintained over time thanks to communication. If communication fails and the frames of reference of reality are lost (Goffman, 1977), memory is destined to disappear. The similarity between AI lucid hallucinations and memory in the real world is extremely evident: we have repeatedly mentioned that AI ‘works’ by simulating human memory, especially if we consider the need to possess a set of information, which for Goffman are frames of reference, where the absence of the latter for the social actor reveals the possibility of memory loss, of forgetting a given event; while for AI, the scenario of statistical noise arises and the output loses its ‘clarity’.

This type of error cannot be programmed, but can easily escape the user requesting information precisely because they are not particularly knowledgeable about the subject of the query. This is why it is necessary to use appropriate search engines and not rely exclusively on generative AI. It is important that this content can be evaluated by people who are knowledgeable on the subject, who can think critically and who are able to judge whether what emerges from these algorithms is useful or misleading. These are often intrinsic errors that are not generated because there is an error in the coding and/or analysis of Big Data, but rather because they emerge from the vast and perhaps excessive amount of information available on the web, which reflects the biases of the sources used for analysis. This shows how easy it is for errors related to stereotypes and prejudices, from gender to ethnicity to political ideology, to arise.

There are many "obvious" errors that have been discussed by experts in the field. Among these, it is very complex for programmers, for example, to eliminate gender stereotypes that emerge with constant frequency, errors that are often dangerous because they are not always particularly evident to an inattentive reader. Others are related to more purely visual aspects, such as the video production of a person or specific scenarios with glaring errors related to the reproduction of the body, such as six fingers on a hand, eyes of unlikely colors, etc. Obviously, the latter errors are the least dangerous because they do not lead to false beliefs; on the contrary, they can be a wake-up call to view the video and content in question with a more critical eye and ensure that the social actor pays more attention and does further research than what has been done by AI.

Having access to images and videos, even with minor errors (hands, eyes, iridescent skies, etc.), is a futuristic version of Habwachs’ (1952) images of memory, which highlights their importance in relation to what we might today consider basic requirements: a temporal and spatial reference, a further reference to the group and, finally, reconstructivity. If these three aspects are present in the video/image produced by AI, we can think that in some way the latter may have created a sort of ‘*memory image*’, contributing concretely to the construction of a shared memory aimed at reducing the mechanisms linked to forgetting.

#### **4. Concluding Considerations**

The importance of building cultural memory while considering AI as an integral part of the process is now clear, given that we can no longer ignore this increasingly used tool, which is being entrusted with an ever-growing number of unimaginable tasks, from medical applications to driving commercial and non-commercial vehicles.

Starting from the assumption that: “people produce knowledge based on the knowledge inherited within their culture, their collectively situated goals and the information they receive from the natural world and, last but not least, from the role played by the *social*, i.e. the importance of pre-structuring”

(Shapin 1982, pp. 196-198), the Edinburgh Science Studies Unit (SST) focused its attention, when AI was not yet a topic of discussion, on the ability to make conscious and culturally defined choices. More than 40 years after these considerations, it is essential to be aware that memory can also be culturally defined by AI and that the introduction of this new tool for human-machine dialogue does not necessarily have to be characterized exclusively by negative aspects. The awareness of the social actor drastically limits the “noise” of Machine Learning, which translates into lucid hallucinations, allowing the algorithm to be remodeled in due course.

On the other hand, it is equally true that the more we use AI, the greater the possibility of encountering errors, whether visible or not.

Here too, there are many similarities between AI and memory, starting with the concept of forgetting a memory (Gadamer, 1960). From this perspective, AI becomes a simple tool for searching for one memory over another in order to select what is best to remember. The “forgotten” memory ends up in a “repository” of information, perhaps much closer to Ricoeur’s (2000) idea of the concept of “oblivion of erasure”, where what is to be forgotten is set aside and destined to be “searched for” only when it has some use for the social actor.

In this regard, therefore, the approach with which we relate to error cannot be understood in a statistical sense, because we do not have the cognitive tools to identify them correctly in algorithms (Buhmann, Paßmann, Fieseler, 2019), but we can intervene upstream by trying to use the most appropriate AI tool. Being more aware that there are multiple search engines, being able to use BOTs in different ways, and knowing that it is still possible to “build” a BOT upstream and train it through our own choice of documentation creates antibodies at our disposal for conscious use.

When we approach new technologies, we are used to expecting a high level of performance from the *machine*, even more so in the field of machine learning. In reality, it is wrong to assume that machines are not prone to error, just as social actors are prone to error, especially when it comes to memory. Testimonies are primarily a combination of several factors: life experiences, mental patterns, expectations, stereotypes, typifications, memories from other people and/or the media, etc. (Mastrobernardino, 2011). The co-construction of memory is, in any case, a combination of different factors, a sort of mediation of different aspects that manifest themselves through external stimuli, some cultural, others personal, etc. These aspects are not necessarily correct, free from political bias, stereotypes, gender differences, etc.

For this reason, I believe that while we must deal with any incorrect outputs as social actors, on the other hand, errors will certainly be reported and corrected in real time, not only by the user but by the AI itself, because we are already at the stage where AI learns from itself and its own mistakes. A series of “corrective” algorithms have been in development for several years now, particularly with regard to the most obvious forms of discrimination, and since memory is co-constructed through the support of groups, “memory”, or rather, the processing of socio-cultural events produced by AI are the result not only of multiple datasets and algorithms, but also of multiple social actors who interact every day with increasingly powerful technological innovation.

The picture that emerges is much more complex than it may appear, because apart from lucid hallucinations, which develop only to a much lesser extent than the set of correct information recreated by AI, and are therefore unable to influence a collective idea, according to the author, the most significant problem lies upstream. If we start from the fact that cultural memory is created through the memories of group members, in this case, which group are we talking about? Is AI capable of altering a memory, or even creating multiple individual memories of group participants and then recreating a collective memory? To date, we do not have a real answer to these questions. We can only speculate that it would be extremely interesting to address these issues through ad hoc research,

combining multiple interdisciplinary aspects, starting with the IT skills not only of each of us, but rather the shared construction of an algorithm among multiple experts.

There is also an aspect related to the temporal dynamic. If we start from the assumption that collective memory is constructed over time and can only be fully understood in retrospect, it is highly unlikely that this is the historical moment in which we will see the greatest shifts in thinking attributable to AI. but we are nevertheless aware of the present, which allows us to hypothesise a series of possible interpretative scenarios, as generative AI itself does. In this regard, we must not forget that among the many areas in which AI is used, both BOTs and information retrieval platforms are used to identify and delimit the boundaries of the object of investigation and the related hypotheses. Delegating such important aspects of the world of research, social or otherwise, is certainly a rather futuristic gamble, but it is not impossible that machines will surpass humans in the near future; just think of the giant strides made in the field of telemedicine. We are within boundaries that are poorly defined, too blurred at present, but so fragile that they force us to reflect on new areas of study between the real and virtual worlds. AI should be considered a sort of intermediate storage tool, a mediator of the communication system, where communicative acts and information tout court find a virtual place in which to be archived, processed and then codified and subsequently re-proposed in the form of virtual output, an innovative version of what Leroi-Gourhan (p. 64) considered the first computers to be a sort of “*Mémoire Extériorisée*” where the holder is not the individual but rather the “*collectivité ethnique*”.

However, there is a warning that we must always bear in mind, namely that AI must be better trained on an ethical and social level, with strong values that lay the foundations so that the transcription of the algorithms underlying Machine Learning is not self-reproduced by the ever-evolving machine itself, but is guided by people, for a process that is no longer machine-centric, but human-centric.

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# Natural memory and artificial memory

Antonella Tennenini\*

**Abstract.** In the anthropological and social transformation in which we are immersed, human beings now embody both natural memory and the so-called artificial memory, produced through neural networks, predictive systems, and algorithmic self-learning in artificial intelligence. It is necessary to understand how such coexistence—while offering advantages and usefulness, yet inevitably also causing harm and loss—can become collaborative, fostering both thought and action. This proposal, developed in a transdisciplinary and critical perspective, argues for keeping at the center the capacity of natural/human memory, of which artificial memory is ultimately a product. By delineating the differences emerging between the two forms of memory, reflections will be advanced concerning the effects of artificial memory on the human inner world, highly vulnerable, on its cognitive and emotional mechanisms, increasingly eroded by the technocratic system to which, beyond the management of knowledge and power, the externalization of memory is now also being delegated.

**Keywords:** Natural memory; Artificial memory; Opportunities; Risks; Cognitive impairment.

**Riassunto.** *Memoria naturale e memoria ufficiale.* Nella trasformazione antropologica e sociale in cui siamo immersi, nell'umano convivono ormai la memoria naturale e la memoria cosiddetta artificiale, prodotta mediante le reti neurali, i sistemi predittivi e di autoapprendimento degli algoritmi dell'intelligenza artificiale. Si rende necessario comprendere come tale coesistenza, che presenta vantaggi e utilità, ma inevitabilmente anche danni e perdite, possa essere collaborativa, agevolando il pensare e il fare. La presente proposta, in chiave transdisciplinare e critica, è di mantenere centrale la capacità della memoria naturale/umana, di cui quella artificiale è il prodotto. Enucleando le differenze che emergono tra le due memorie, si avvanzeranno riflessioni riguardo agli effetti della memoria artificiale sul mondo interiore dell'umano, molto vulnerabile, sui suoi meccanismi cognitivi ed emotivi, sempre più erosi dal sistema tecnocratico a cui, oltre alla gestione del sapere e del potere, viene attualmente delegata anche l'esternalizzazione della memoria.

**Parole chiave:** Memoria naturale; Memoria artificiale; Opportunità; Rischi; Riduzione cognitiva.

## 1. Introduction

Working memory, short-term and long-term memory, episodic, semantic, yet the list of possible definitions could continue, given the extensive relevance of this field of knowledge which, long investigated by philosophy, has in recent decades gained increasing attention in psychology, neuroscience, and, more recently, in the interdisciplinary area of *memory studies*<sup>1</sup>. Memory is also one of the hinges of the digital world.

It is from the latter that the present work starts, in order to explore, with a future-oriented perspective, whether artificial intelligence (hereafter AI) systems—with their constant and silent interference in every domain of daily life, may serve as an expansion and a genuine support to natural memory, and in which ways, or whether, instead, they may lead to a reduction and decline in human cognitive and emotional faculties<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For references on the evolution of Memory Studies, see online G. Bartolini (2024), *Ricordare e capire il... passato. Il valore della letteratura per i Memory Studies*: [https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/status\\_quaestionis/article/download/18765/17751/40042](https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/status_quaestionis/article/download/18765/17751/40042).

<sup>2</sup> The issue is part of the “Great Debate” around the numerous researches concerning AI, dating back to the last century, among which it aroused a lot of interest the book by J.R. Searle (1984), *Menti, cervelli e programmi. Un dibattito sull'intelligenza artificiale*, edited by Tonfoni. Milan: Clup-Clued.

To this purpose, a report is cited: with regard to generative AI, in Italy, according to data provided by Vincenzo Cosenza, the well-known ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI and launched in 2022, grew from 2.4 million monthly users in 2024 to 8.8 million in 2025, whereas in 2023 it was still below one million<sup>3</sup>. The use of AI spans different generations. Individuals born in the previous century who now interact with ChatGPT draw upon a consolidated memory, derived from pre-existing knowledge acquired predominantly through analogic and tangible means. The broader this reservoir of knowledge, the greater the ability to recognize the reliability of the model's responses to specific queries, and, most importantly, to verify whether the output is truthful, just as Mnemosyne inspired humans in their pursuit of truth itself. In the intergenerational passage, it is crucial to preserve such faculties of discernment, so as to enable a conscious and balanced use of technological “assistants” and safeguard memory (Carr, 2020).

In this contribution, adopting a critical perspective, we shall engage with ongoing debates concerning AI, particularly focusing on the theme of memory, within a theoretical framework drawing upon philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences. Special attention will be devoted to the powerful technological transformation currently underway, which entails a form of disengagement by *Sapiens* from the active memorization of content, in favor of the immediate retrieval of information and knowledge through external, network-connected devices, capable of returning infinite data stored and processed by algorithms on a statistical basis (Cristianini, 2023). The aim is to argue that natural memory—although influenced by spatiotemporal contexts and heterogeneous factors, and therefore not “purely natural”<sup>4</sup> and inherently imperfect—cannot be neglected, let alone replaced, by artificial memory, now widely disseminated and integrated, for multiple reasons that will be discussed below. Before proceeding, it is necessary to specify how the two forms of memory are to be considered in the present discussion. According to Treccani (online, entry Memoria), memory is:

(...) la capacità di ritenere traccia di informazioni relative a eventi, immagini, sensazioni, idee, ecc. di cui si sia avuto esperienza e di rievocarle quando lo stimolo originario sia cessato riconoscendole come stati di coscienza trascorsi, sia i contenuti stessi dell'esperienza in quanto sono rievocati, sia l'insieme dei meccanismi psicologici e neurofisiologici che permettono di registrare e successivamente di richiamare informazioni<sup>5</sup>.

Artificial memory, on the other hand, is here understood broadly as the set of external systems “delegated” to computers and the Internet: digital devices, cloud services, agents, assistants, and AI applications that, through architectures inspired, at least metaphorically, by neural functioning and based on algorithms, encode, store, retrieve, and return information and semantic content (Hoskins, 2011). While such delegation enables rapid access and ready retrieval of information, it simultaneously reduces the exercise of natural memory, with potentially negative consequences for mechanisms of learning, memorization, and critical thinking, extending even to cognitive decline (Bloudoff, 2013; Ali *et al.*, 2024), as will be discussed later.

It should be stressed that this proposal does not aim to construct a dichotomous or competitive opposition between the two forms of memory, but rather to reaffirm the centrality of natural memory—i.e. of the human being (Bertolaso, Marcos 2023), which, by maintaining its functional autonomy, can benefit from cooperation and integration with artificial memory (Ienca, 2019). This is

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<sup>3</sup> See L. Tremolada, *Ogni mese 8,8 milioni di italiani usano ChatGpt. L'app è usata dal 37% degli studenti*, in «Il Sole 24 Ore», July 2, 2025, available online: [www.infodata.ilssole24ore.com/2025/07/02/ogni-mese-88-milioni-di-italiani-usano-chatgpt-lapp-e-usata-dal-37-degli-studenti](http://www.infodata.ilssole24ore.com/2025/07/02/ogni-mese-88-milioni-di-italiani-usano-chatgpt-lapp-e-usata-dal-37-degli-studenti).

<sup>4</sup> An extensive examination of natural memory and artificial memory is dedicated by T. Maldonado (2006), *Memoria e Conoscenza*. Milan: Feltrinelli, p. 86 sgg.

<sup>5</sup> (...) the capacity to retain traces of information relating to events, images, sensations, ideas, etc., experienced, and to recall them once the original stimulus has ceased, recognizing them as past states of consciousness; it refers both to the very contents of experience insofar as they are recalled, and to the ensemble of psychological and neurophysiological mechanisms that allow for the recording and subsequent retrieval of information (*My translation*).

essential in order to remain faithful to an anthropological existence, characterized by both strengths and vulnerabilities, shaped by the relationships of a humanity that has advanced across millennia, yet still has much to explore—both cognitively and civically. Indeed, the ensemble of rational, emotional (Arsena, 2024), and affective components guides life trajectories and choices, grounded in bodily and tangible proximities, coincidences, contingencies, spirituality, customs, traditions, and conflicts, with collective effects over time. For this reason, human mnemonic activity cannot be reduced merely to rationality and calculation, as in computational artificial memory, but constitutes the daily construction of social beings who, in a maieutic sense, extract their existential contents from the traces of the past, which endure and remain open to interpretation<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, the parallels between the two forms of memory and their respective developments will make it possible to highlight differences and points of convergence, advantages and risks, with the aim of reaffirming—as already stated—that human activity, despite being inherently prone to inaccuracies and errors, bears the responsibility of maintaining control over mnemonic processes. After all, artificial memory exists only because it is produced and sustained by humans who, with the rapid advancement of technology, are now contemplating the surpassing of their own intelligence through the autonomous agency of AI<sup>7</sup>. Such a scenario presents numerous challenges and issues, not only epistemological, but also ethical, social, and political, pertaining to responsibility, transparency, fairness, and the protection of privacy.

The following sections will outline the main transformations that memory is undergoing due to the pervasiveness of AI and the associated risks, supported by some empirical studies on the potential for cognitive reduction.

## 2. Transformations of Memory

Memory originates from the Indo-European root “men”, with the meaning of “that which persists”, which is found both in the noun μνημοσύνη (*mnēmosýnē*), from which derives the name of the Greek deity Mnemosyne, daughter of Uranus and Gaia and mother of the nine goddesses (Muses) of the arts and sciences, and in the verb μιμνήσκω (*mimnēscō*), “I remember” (Treccani online, entries Mnemosine, mnemonico). This etymology leads us, on the semantic plane, toward the preservation and transmission of knowledge acquired over time and arising from cognitive and emotional faculties. In ancient Greece, the aedi recited the great epic poems through mnemonic techniques, an art that developed and found its most extensive application until the invention of writing and beyond<sup>8</sup>. One may think, for example, of orations or theatrical forms that grounded their memory on its use. Writing, however, immediately aroused concerns, positioning itself alongside orality. Plato, for instance, following the Socratic line, referred to writing as τέχνη (*téchne*), capable of transmitting data and information mechanically, without necessarily committing them to memory beforehand but with the possibility of reading them. In the *Phaedrus* (2018, 275c), he raised the issue of how to render knowledge truly available to all and not let it fall into oblivion. Probably, if Plato lived today, he might revisit and overturn the myth, since writing, understood as the outcome of thought, reflection, critical judgment, and the gathering of ideas, is one of the means to keep natural memory alive and active. Moreover, the best way to truly keep it alive is to do so manually, as it stimulates the brain as a creative act. This also demonstrates that innovation can bring benefits, though recognized and accepted over time, after the pioneering phase.

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<sup>6</sup> See P. Jedlowski (2002), *Memoria, esperienza e modernità. Memorie e società nel 20. secolo*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> N. Cristianini (2025) dedicates a wide-ranging discussion to the theme of AI as a challenge to human intelligence and its overcoming in *Sovrumano: oltre i limiti della nostra intelligenza*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

<sup>8</sup> See “a classic” of memory, F. A. Yates, *L'arte della memoria*, Turin: Einaudi, 1987. The first part of which is dedicated to mnemotechnics.

Natural memory sustains the arduous task of living, anchoring us to certainties derived from experience and creating a connection between past actions and those yet to come, both individually and socially. In particular, it offers the faculty to choose between what one wishes to remember and what one wishes to forget; it represents the *continuum* of our existence<sup>9</sup>. It moves like magma within the body, constructing and reconstructing itself, thanks to the contribution of elements shared by the community. Even autobiographical memories are not entirely autonomous but can be influenced by those of others (Maldonado, p. 30). Its traces return, make themselves felt, and can become burdensome, to the point of seeking oblivion to be relieved of the weight. Yet they may instead provide consolation in a glorious past, in a lived experience that penetrates the skin and reaches the viscera. Memory is the transit of happy, dramatic, and tragic events, in a whirlwind of recall and removal; it is a reference point in a system where one can recognize oneself in the other, with whom one establishes a connection and enters into relation<sup>10</sup>.

Siegel argues that: «La memoria non è solo ciò che possiamo ricordare del passato; (...) secondo una definizione più ampia è l'insieme dei processi con cui gli eventi del passato influenzano le risposte future»<sup>11</sup>. He also states that the brain is composed of neural networks that allow processes of information encoding, thereby fostering learning. Experience influences the structure of the brain and its impact on interactions with the world and on the development of the relational mind, which carries out mnemonic activity. Our brain is in continuous development; thus, we learn and remember throughout our lives. The process of remembering is not automatic but follows a series of variables that allow the reactivation of a visual and cognitive circuit. The brain, in fact, is not endowed with a storage depot but depends on the activation of the neural network and through associations with various levels of experience: semantic (references to art), autobiographical (our positioning of ourselves at that moment), somatic (bodily sensations), perceptual (noises, particular smells), emotional (moods), and behavioral (performance of actions). Memory, therefore, is not static but is a set of active and dynamic processes that change during growth and in the mature phase of life, re-categorizing lived experiences, which implies continuous revision according to new perspectives influenced by environmental stimuli. This activity transforms memory, its consolidation, as well as its elimination<sup>12</sup>. The representation of objects in time and space allows the elaboration and management of information, the development of skills enabling interaction with the environment, and the capacity for problem solving.

A prominent role is also played by material culture, not materialistic culture, which proves to be a mediator of memory, as well as an activator of emotions connected to the past. Objects themselves, in fact, are a physical presence in human experience, with highly relevant implications in the cognitive, psychic, and emotional configuration of individuals and communities. They have been studied mainly, from psychoanalytic or deconstructionist perspectives, as emblems of the ineffability of trauma or as symptoms of contradictions disseminated by progress. They have transitive functions, as “nodes” and junctions, cardinal points where part of lived experience converges, and upon which the present grafts itself through forms of narration, reflection, and lyrical evocation. They are connected to memory and trauma, with reference to forms of negotiation of the meaning of history and of intercultural and intergenerational confrontation. Material objects engage with forms of elaboration and removal of individual or collective traumatic experiences. The banal objects of daily life, the so-called “things”, in processes of elaboration of violence and pain, can be transformed into

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<sup>9</sup> See the article available online: [www.accademianazionalevirgiliana.org/ANV23/images/Mariangela/Multimedia/COVID19/Copia\\_di\\_Archivio\\_e\\_memoria.pdf](http://www.accademianazionalevirgiliana.org/ANV23/images/Mariangela/Multimedia/COVID19/Copia_di_Archivio_e_memoria.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See M. Ferraris (2025), *La pelle. Che cosa significa pensare nell'epoca dell'intelligenza artificiale*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

<sup>11</sup> D. J. Siegel (2021), *La mente relazionale. Neurobiologia dell'esperienza interpersonale*, Milan, p. 153: Memory is not only what we can recall of the past; (...) according to a broader definition it is the set of processes by which past events influence future responses (*My translation*).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-214.

therapeutic or harmful texts, at times linked to elaboration, at other times to the removal of what was suffered or perpetrated<sup>13</sup>.

Now, in the overwhelming transformative impact in which the human-machine relationship is increasingly growing and hybrid, the role of natural memory, understood as a set of biological, experiential, and emotional factors, may represent the connecting path, a true junction between what is not mediated by a screen, a chip, or similar prosthetic objects, and what, instead, is constantly artificialized. This transformation from natural memory to artificial memory, made by and of algorithms rather than of thoughts and ideas, arouses fears and concerns, which are justified whenever human memory is not strengthened. After all, the human being needs to anchor themselves to solid memorial bases in order to move upon them, understanding which to erase because they are dysfunctional or disturbing, and at the same time has the duty, as a witness of the age in which they live, to improve the world they inherited and will leave to posterity. This is a civic and social commitment that no artificial automaton will ever be able to fulfill, since it is incorporeal, devoid of temporal, spatial, and sentimental ties with the before, during, and after<sup>14</sup>.

Specifically, social platforms exhume memories and enter into the narration of our essences through the power of emotions, sometimes manipulating them (Oliverio Ferraris, 2024).

Boccia Artieri argues that:

Se affidi il compito al tuo telefono e alle piattaforme devi tenere conto del fatto che non solo archiviano, ma selezionano e ripropongono. Delegando, accetti che decidano cosa riportare in primo piano e cosa lasciare sullo sfondo. C'è una curatela algoritmica della memoria: diventa un'attività orientata a generare emozione, non una selezione consapevole. Ed è parziale: non è quello che vuoi ricordare, ma quello che emotivamente vuole essere raccontato nel presente, la stessa logica delle Storie, che durano solo 24 ore<sup>15</sup>.

And he continues: «L'AI più che ripescare, genera: prende frammenti estraibili, li remixa, li ripropone quando e come decide lui/lei, anche in maniera brutale. Quello che viene fuori, magari con una musica di sottofondo per evocare ricordi, non è veramente tuo. Ancora una volta è emotivo, e privo di profondità»<sup>16</sup>.

Artificial machines have every interest in not offending our sensibilities, because by triggering positive emotions, people linger and interact more (Tyng *et al.*, 2017; Zhu *et al.*, 2022). This constant and pervasive mechanism fosters the profits of AI producers and managers, whose priority is certainly not the diffusion of happiness for all. ChatGPT & Co. erase memory and can create false recollections. Generative AI, in fact, must always be explained everything from the beginning, as if it had to convince us each time of being the best possible interlocutor. In doing this, it learns from our data<sup>17</sup>.

Quattrociocchi warns that:

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<sup>13</sup> On this part dedicated to objects related to memory, see M. Giancotti, L. Marfè, P. Violi (2023), *La memoria degli oggetti*, Milan-Udine: Mimesis.

<sup>14</sup> On the corporeity and incorporeity of intelligence, see M. Ferraris at the following online article: [www.pressreader.com/italy/corriere-della-sera/20240801/282527253704307?srsltid=AfmBOopZ8Td-RM84f\\_4LEs0Y9-Zgqc3I-KE9\\_pUPNxpBJsYwTcp8zkFy](http://www.pressreader.com/italy/corriere-della-sera/20240801/282527253704307?srsltid=AfmBOopZ8Td-RM84f_4LEs0Y9-Zgqc3I-KE9_pUPNxpBJsYwTcp8zkFy).

<sup>15</sup> The interviews with G. Boccia Artieri, Full Professor of Communication Sciences at University of Urbino e with W. Quattrociocchi, Full Professor of Data Science at Sapienza are in M. Pennisi, *Cosa sta facendo (e cosa farà) l'AI ai nostri ricordi? «La memoria diventa un prodotto»*, in «Il Corriere della Sera», 26.07.2025, available online: [/www.corriere.it/sette/25\\_luglio\\_26/memoria-prodotto-social-ai-9e574bba-e6b8-4b57-a8c4-06c881080xlk.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/sette/25_luglio_26/memoria-prodotto-social-ai-9e574bba-e6b8-4b57-a8c4-06c881080xlk.shtml). If you entrust the task to your phone and platforms, you must take into account the fact that they not only archive but also select and re-propose. By delegating, you accept that they decide what to bring to the foreground and what to leave in the background. There is an algorithmic curatorship of memory: it becomes an activity oriented toward generating emotion, not a conscious selection. And it is partial: it is not what you want to remember, but what emotionally wants to be narrated in the present, the same logic of Stories, which last only 24 hours (*My translation*).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: AI, more than retrieving, generates: it takes extractable fragments, remixes them, repropose them when and how it decides, even brutally. What emerges, perhaps with background music to evoke memories, is not truly yours. Once again, it is emotional, and devoid of depth (*My translation*).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Il contesto è un elemento fondativo nell'interazione che hai con la macchina in una determinata finestra temporale. Ma questa interazione evapora: non rimane traccia. Puoi usare dei prompt per cercare di farle ricordare, ma il modo in cui viviamo questa interazione racconta più della nostra mancata comprensione dello strumento che della sua reale capacità. Se cerco di instaurare un rapporto duraturo con un LLM, emerge subito un vuoto emotivo: è evidente il bisogno, umano, che sta dietro quel tentativo<sup>18</sup>.

And he continues: «Oggi il limite è architetturale, ma sarà superato: basterà aumentare la quantità di contesto memorizzabile e creare un'infrastruttura condivisa tra tutte le sessioni. È solo questione di tempo»<sup>19</sup>.

At present, in fact, ChatGPT is characterized by “systemic amnesia”, since it does not retain the lists of interactions, although users expect it to remember<sup>20</sup>, but this function may soon be enhanced.

Now, human beings have always sought to leave signs and traces of their existence and activity in the space and time in which they lived, to establish and maintain—or adapt and change—the value system of society. Even before true writing with the invention of alphabets and later Gutenberg's press, humans have always literally imprinted their marks of passage in places, for example, with cave pictograms, in order to transfer to future generations reference points from which to resume the journey of knowledge and its expansion. They have always sought means and tools to support their memory and recollections, at first for survival—in the case of a path to avoid due to the presence of beasts or enemies, with a purpose of human solidarity—or, conversely, to wage war with misleading and provocative signs. Subsequently, the progress of civilization exponentially increased the domains of knowledge, sectoralizing them, to the point that it would be impossible to collect solely with human minds the entire heritage of mnemonic production that already characterizes the individual alone, not to mention the infinite and diverse memories—by origins, uses, and customs—of communities around the world. Thus, with the advance of technology, humans have always used and equipped themselves with memory supports that allow them to organize and archive their activities, both in private and through the construction of buildings destined for this purpose, such as archives, libraries, land registries, and so on. In the Digital Age, with the overabundance of true and false information chasing each other on social media and platforms, it is no longer easy to clearly distinguish the public content of a piece of news from its private aspect, which becomes memory, especially considering the enormous amount of data on citizens' lives collected both by public authorities and financial actors, ending up in AI cloud storage. Although regulations aim to keep private and public separate, it is increasingly less possible to operate within this rationality, given the continuous transit from the personal to the collective dimension and vice versa<sup>21</sup>.

Currently, material supports continue to exist in the form of servers consisting of infinite digital disks placed in special cabinets, such as those in the immense warehouses of major tech corporations in Silicon Valley.

So far, archiving has mainly concerned human production of writings, images, music, photographs—all fully accessible. At present, it concerns the management of the infinite quantity of data made available through the traces left on connections to a so-called intelligent digital device, which profiles and maps the user. Memory is entrusted to the collection of infinite databases, delocalized on external supports, to cloud storage spaces, shared databases, up to the boundless diaries

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: Context is a foundational element in the interaction you have with the machine in a given time window. But this interaction evaporates: no trace remains. You can use prompts to try to make it remember, but the way in which we live this interaction tells more about our lack of understanding of the tool than about its real capacity. If I try to establish a lasting relationship with an LLM, an emotional void immediately emerges: it is evident, the human need underlying that attempt (*My translation*).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: Today the limitation is architectural, but it will be overcome: it will suffice to increase the amount of storable context and create an infrastructure shared among all sessions. It is only a matter of time (*My translation*).

<sup>20</sup> See F. Cerati, *Intelligenza artificiale e memoria. Siamo destinati a soffrire di «amnesia digitale»?», in «Il Sole 24 Ore», February 11, 2025, available online: [www.ilsole24ore.com/art/intelligenza-artificiale-e-memoria-siamo-destinati-soffrire-amnesia-digitale-AG4wHnoC?refresh\\_ce=1](http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/intelligenza-artificiale-e-memoria-siamo-destinati-soffrire-amnesia-digitale-AG4wHnoC?refresh_ce=1).*

<sup>21</sup> See the article available online: <https://moked.it/blog/2023/01/05/memoria-degli-archivi-e-archivi-della-memoria>.

in social networks, thus delegated (Liberace, 2020). On the other hand, in the constant and continuous growth of immeasurable intellectual productions and the vast contents accumulated over millennia, an external memory may be a way to preserve them from the wear of time and an aid in their placement and retrieval. All this must be done with full respect for an ethics on which the human being must work in order to accompany this transition and to minimize the possibility of errors, which will inevitably occur, so as to avoid the alteration of reality and truth. Memory, understood as the heritage of all, and not as the inalienable private property of the individual (Maldonado, p. 33), can contribute to the good functioning of society. Beyond possessing knowledge, it is fundamental to be able to access information.

The frequent use of AI by users allows managers to enhance algorithms day by day, whose operating formulas are known to insiders. This makes AI sophisticated, with a language and an ability of interaction capable of increasing its own memory with statistically plausible responses. However, artificial agents themselves can communicate with each other, drawing on data from which they can also learn, as well as associate, connect, store, and process, recognizing patterns, models, and paths (Liberace, 2020). At this point, problems could arise in verifying the veracity of what is stored by the machine, which is still the result of probabilistic extrapolation, albeit with the language of very high-level statistics.

In short, in the digital field, everything is transforming very rapidly: the methods acquired in the analogic world, with their value system, can represent our compass to guide us toward the new, which is already particularly impactful and laden with uncertainty concerning our lived experiences, our cognitive, cultural, and social processes. Artificial memory, being incorporeal, is able to emulate mnemonic capacities, but it has no recollections tied to sensitivity, sacredness, or feelings. Therefore, it has only the value of an archive, ordered and coded according to rules (Liberace, 2020). The risk that humans run in relying on delocalized memory is the impoverishment and restriction of their own capacities and abilities. The world, in fact, is flooded with information and infinite data, which form the basis of memorization, but in overabundance alter concentration and attention, as will be better seen in the following paragraph.

### 3. Risks to Natural Memory

Within the epistemic scope of epochal technological change, beyond its potential benefits—such as, for instance, in the clinical field for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental illnesses<sup>22</sup>—the focus here is instead directed toward its critical aspects, with particular reference to the possible reduction of cognitive function and of the modalities of knowledge transmission due to constant connection to the Internet and AI systems. Indeed, the concern that artificial memory might “weaken” natural memory is supported by various empirical studies: among others, Sparrow *et al.* (2011) demonstrated that individuals, by easily retrieving information and knowledge online, are subject to the so-called *Google effect* (Gong, Yang, 2024), namely the tendency not to memorize autonomously and to recall less. This phenomenon is part of the broader framework of *cognitive offloading* (Risko, Gilbert, 2016; Peng, Yeh, 2025), that is, the cognitive “discharge” resulting from the use of technological tools to process a task, particularly when trust in such tools has been established.

This probable reduction has also been the focus of a recent study conducted at the MIT Media Lab in Boston. In the research led by Nataliya Kosmyna *et al.* (2025), three groups of participants, drawn from a sample of 54 volunteers, were compared in the elaboration of three short texts on predefined topics. The first group (“Brain-only”) could write solely on the basis of their own mental resources, without Internet access. The second group had access to the Google search engine. The third group, instead, used ChatGPT. The participants’ brains were analyzed during the experiment through

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<sup>22</sup> In reference to the opportunities offered by neurotechnological innovations, which raise fundamental legal, ethical, and social issues in interfering with another person’s neural activity, thereby requiring new rights to protect both privacy and moral integrity, see A. Lavazza, V. A. Sironi (2022), *Neuroetica. Interpretare e orientare la rivoluzione delle neuroscienze*, Rome: Carocci, pp. 217-226.

electrodes connected to an electroencephalogram: in the very same writing task, the three groups exhibited markedly different levels of brain activation. Compared to the baseline level of the group writing without digital assistance, the group using the search engine registered a cerebral connectivity 34–48% lower; the ChatGPT group showed a cerebral connectivity 55% lower. Thus, the more extensive the external support, the more reduced brain activity appeared to be, particularly for the ChatGPT group, whose performance was poorer than that of their counterparts at every level: neural, linguistic, and scoring.

The “Brain-only” group showed activation of brain areas associated with creativity and self-monitoring. These functions are essential for generating, planning, and revising content. Those who used Google activated primarily the occipital and visual cortex, the regions responsible for assimilating information via sight from the screen and then collecting it. Finally, those who used ChatGPT mainly activated areas linked to almost automatic functions within an external framework.

Therefore, this experiment demonstrated that relying entirely on AI generates alignment of thought and repetition of messages. Furthermore, in 83% of cases, those who had composed their texts with ChatGPT subsequently struggled to cite phrases from their own writings just a few minutes after submission. Their attention had been focused exclusively on passively reproducing externally generated information, without perceiving it as their own content. By contrast, nearly all of those who had written independently were able to cite sentences from their texts almost verbatim, showing much greater attention to the content and meaning of their work (and not merely to its form). In this latter case, participants remembered more compared to those who had relied on AI. Thus, under the experimental conditions applied, memory consolidation—understood as the ensemble of neurobiological mechanisms enabling the transfer of information from short-term memory to more stable long-term memory, was negatively affected by AI.

Now, without demonizing it, AI with its external memories, conceived as a support for human activity<sup>23</sup>, may represent a benefit for humanity as a whole, though inevitably with risks, since it is a machine to be steered. This, however, will only hold true once it becomes available to all, given that social and political inequalities will intensify between those who can access and competently use it, and those who will be excluded for lack of economic and cultural resources.

Returning to natural memory, it is an organism, or rather, as Eco (2014) put it, «a muscle like those of the legs: if you do not exercise it, it withers, and you become (from a mental point of view) differently abled»<sup>24</sup>. Thus, exercising and consolidating it means, above all from an ethical standpoint, not allowing oneself to be excessively absorbed by the distracting present, and ultimately avoiding the risk of “forgetfulness”, as highlighted by the aforementioned studies. The danger posed by seeking knowledge from artificial systems while evading effort and reflection, and by entrusting ideas, thoughts, and inventions that feed the infinite databases through interaction with external mnemonic tools, must not be underestimated but prevented (Stiegler, 2023). Training logic and reason, which are the handmaids of memory, means resisting the simplification of the technological *hic et nunc*, and instead equipping oneself with the tools needed to face the complexity of life. Consequently, systematically removing the exercise of memory through the facilitation of artificial devices inevitably entails relinquishing something of our life and our brain<sup>25</sup>.

In many contexts, it is argued that the use of AI will liberate us from repetitive tasks, leaving room for creativity. However, it is well known that natural talent, if not trained through commitment, practice, concentration, and dedication, withers. This is particularly true for development during the age of learning and schooling, when it is crucial to exercise the use of internal memory in order to strengthen it, render it flexible, and enable it to accommodate new elements that enhance it.

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<sup>23</sup> Expression used by A. Fabris (2025), who has dealt a lot with ethical issues related to AI in his writings. See, in particular, *La filosofia nell'epoca dell'intelligenza artificiale*, Rome: Carocci, pp. 13, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Umberto Eco, *Caro nipote, studia a memoria*, in «L'Espresso», January 1, 2014, available online: <https://lespresso.it/c/idee/2014/1/3/umberto-eco-caro-nipote-studia-a-memoria/18021>.

<sup>25</sup> See the article available online: [www.agendadigitale.eu/cultura-digitale/tecnologia-contro-complessita-ecco-il-prezzo-che-il-cervello-paga-alla-semplificazione](http://www.agendadigitale.eu/cultura-digitale/tecnologia-contro-complessita-ecco-il-prezzo-che-il-cervello-paga-alla-semplificazione).

## 4. Conclusions

Memory has been extensively explored by the classics of thought, including Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine, as closely connected to the temporal dimension of the past or to introspection, imprinted in the “soul that learns”. From their theories emerged inquiries exclusively tied to the human essence, made of intellect and interiority. Progress is leading us toward an externalization of our memory, which only time will determine whether it will truly benefit the human condition, which continues to need to remain connected with its inner sphere.

Considering that natural memory includes the comprehension and interpretation of what happens, it cannot be duplicated, perhaps only distantly simulated; it still deserves to be explored as a portion of the brain—the most mysterious organ of life, which needs to be nourished both materially and spiritually; as it is embodied in a body that learns throughout life, it has a thread that sustains it and keeps it within the weaving. The body is mutable, absorbs from environmental conditions, knows, experiences, memorizes, and, on the basis of these aspects, decides what meaning to give to its existence in respect of itself and of those around it.

At this point, it is necessary to understand in what ways to delegate the actions concerning learning, knowledge, skills, and identity in order to preserve our intelligence, on which memory is based. Having artificial memories, which will develop increasingly, has the advantage of freeing space and time in ours, which could be a way to devote oneself to seeking a different meaning in life. Using artificial memories means ethically and politically reshaping procedures, protocols, and rules in human cooperation, but without undermining what makes humanity such, namely its distinguishing itself in the uniqueness of preserving an anthropological memory. Therefore, it is necessary to combine natural memory and artificial memory, to find forms of coexistence, complementarity, and cohabitation, in order to construct the epistemic scope of change and guide the new course. Memory, in its aspects of recalling social relations, can be an antidote against the repetition of forms of violence and against the re-proposal of atrocities. The antibodies exist: we humans and our capacities to learn, invent, and know not in a procedural and standardized way, but intelligently. For this reason, it may be useful to communicate judiciously with the artificial connectionist world<sup>26</sup>, granting it the right space, not dominance, in order to grasp its opportunities, when these will be available to all.

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<sup>26</sup> See M. Pasquinelli (2025), *Nell'occhio dell'algoritmo. Storia e critica dell'intelligenza artificiale*. Rome: Carocci, pp. 177-196.

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