



## Writing in Stone: Alter Kacyzne's *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland*

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In 1947, historian Raphael A. Abromavitch compiled and reprinted over five hundred pre-Holocaust photographs in his New York publication *The Vanished World: Jewish Cities, Jewish People*. Among them was *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland*, an image of a solitary worker in the middle of an unfinished cobblestone path, by Warsaw-based artist and poet Alter Kacyzne. (Fig. 1) Organized around a close reading of the photograph that begins at the edges of the frame and spills into the center of the picture plane, this paper explores a history of loss that radiated outward from the small Polish village of Ostroleka to the shores of the United States. In the first section, I use the crumbling ruins in the corner of the image to anchor my discussion of *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* as a record of a destroyed village. Focusing on the loose stones scattered along the cobblestone path leading toward the center of the image, the second part of the study explores Kacyzne's photograph in dialogue with Polish Holocaust monuments. Finally, I will draw upon the old Jewish man pictured in the middle of the frame to root my investigation of *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* as a visual space that allowed for immigrant Jews living in the United States to mourn a decimated homeland.

In exploring questions about a cultural trauma so extreme that it exceeds the boundaries of standard representation, I have chosen to experiment with my habitual writing practices both in terms of style and structure. Rhetorically, my study aims to reflect the complex work that Kacyzne's image does as a multilayered site of grieving. As I move simultane-



**Fig. 1:** Alter Kacyzne, *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland*, c. 1920s, gelatin silver print, 7 ¾ x 6 inches, from Raphael A. Abramovitch, ed., *The Vanished World: Jewish Cities, Jewish People* (New York: Forward Association, 1947).

ously from the outside of the photograph inward and from the center of destruction outward, I will peel away the layers of meaning that *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* has taken on in the years since the Holocaust until I arrive, in the end, at its original context during the interwar period. In exploring the ways in which the significance of the photograph shifted over time and across space, my intention is to disrupt any sense of a linear narrative from catastrophe to redemption. Instead, I trace paths that diverge and collide, that fracture and split apart, in order to reflect the difficulty of mourning and the impossibility of integrating a painful past into the present.

## I. Writing in Ruins

In the upper right-hand corner of *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland*, just behind the fragmentary path scattered with rocks, Kacyzne depicts the base of a building, or, perhaps, the edge of a windowsill. A series of jagged steps cut into the right side of the picture plane and a stone slab, forming a frame across the upper edge of the image, crumbles into rubble before it dissolves into shadows. Foreshadowing the traumatic events that led to the destruction of the village of Ostroleka, these disintegrating ruins allow survivors of once-vibrant Jewish villages in Poland to connect visually and viscerally with a homeland that they can never return to physically.

*Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* contains destruction and histories of destruction. Buried beneath the crumbling foundation imaged along the borders of Kacyzne's photograph are layers of ruins, fractured shards left behind from centuries of disease, fire, famine, poverty and war. In spite of numerous periods of instability, however, Ostroleka continued to flourish as a Jewish cultural center until the German army invaded in September of 1939. After that day, Pinia Gedankan and Dan Kahan, Ostroleka's most notorious pranksters and troublemakers, were no longer there to "liven things up in the town."<sup>1</sup> The water-carrier, "a tall Jew with broad shoulders and a black beard" named Benjamin, never again went to the synagogue for his evening prayers.<sup>2</sup> Chaim Pinchas Gingold, a caring, generous *mohel*, and his wife, Juhidis, faced unthinkable cruelty, starvation, humiliation, and, finally, extermination. Trapped behind barbed-wire fences, Velvel Naskes, Leizer Minz, and Shmuel Leibel Yismech, respected scholars, religious leaders, and craftsmen, met brutal, violent ends.<sup>3</sup> Here, along these crumbling steps and cobblestone paths, stone split open like skin and splintered like bone.

There is nothing within the frame of Kacyzne's image to indicate the violent destruction of the Jewish community of Ostroleka. Nevertheless, this image rises out of the shadows of a devastating history to "bring back the past in the form of a ghostly revenant."<sup>4</sup> Enclosed within the borders of this scene is a painful and unavoidable realization: this world that once was, these ruins deteriorating into shadow, would soon collapse under the weight of violence.<sup>5</sup>

1. H. Gingold, *Ostroleka Which Is No More* (JewishGen: The Home of Jewish Genealogy, [cited November 28, 2008]); available from <http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/ostro/ostro4.html>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., xv–xvii. Also Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 23.

5. I am indebted here to an argument that Susan Sontag makes about Roman Vishniac's images of Polish Jews in her 1973 study *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 70.

In the years since the war, Ostroleka has become not a place, but “an idea of a place ever more tenuously dependent on the vicissitudes of personal, familial, and cultural memory,” ever more reliant on relics and photographs.<sup>6</sup> Because every physical bridge to this village crumbled and burned, Kacyzne’s image carries a great responsibility as a visual bridge across time and space. Within the edges of the photographic frame, a yearning for the comfort of the old world collides with painful memories of catastrophic loss. For the few citizens of Ostroleka who, by chance or circumstance, escaped Nazi brutality, Kacyzne’s photograph serves as a fragment, a sliver, a remnant of their former lives. Standing in the place of the wooden houses and synagogues that were burned to the ground, erased, this photograph contains both the affection and longing for a now-decimated homeland and the anguish of mass murder.<sup>7</sup> Out of this image, out of the center of suffering, “life goes on, but in two temporal directions at once, the future unable to escape the grip of a memory laden with grief.”<sup>8</sup>

## II. Writing in Shrines

Eight years after the Nazi’s flattened the Jewish population of Ostroleka, Kacyzne’s photograph was reproduced and disseminated in the pages of *The Vanished World*. In his introduction to the photographic anthology, archivist and editor Raphael Abromavitch “offers” *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland*, along with the other photographs in his book, as “constituent stones in that great monument which will be erected by World Jewry in memory of the world that has disappeared.”<sup>9</sup> Following his efforts to position Kacyzne’s photograph as a building block, or a stepping stone, in the broader cultural effort to honor the victims of Nazi terror, this section of the paper explores *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* as a memorial to unthinkable loss. I argue that the photograph, operating along the fault line between built monuments and textual memorials, opens up a meaningful and salient commemorative space.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of Abromavitch’s photographic anthology, *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* takes on new meanings—it becomes not simply a document of a world that was destroyed, but also a site of mourning. In fact, *The Vanished World* honors the lost communities of Central and Eastern

6. Sontag, *On Photography*, 70.

7. *Ibid.*, 261.

8. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 34.

9. Raphael A. Abramovitch, ed., *The Vanished World: Jewish Cities, Jewish People* (New York: Forward Association, 1947), 11. Emphasis added.

10. James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 140.

Europe by making overt structural references to an ancient Jewish practice of monument building. Emulating the traditional Jewish memorial books that, now almost entirely absent from discourses on Holocaust memory, once functioned as central sites of collective mourning for Polish survivors, the textual contributions to Abromavitch's New York publication are translated into two languages and printed in parallel columns.<sup>11</sup> The pages of *The Vanished World*, like conventional memorial books, also include maps that sketch out the geographical relationships between the demolished villages in Europe and turn from right to left.<sup>12</sup> In light of these similarities, Abromavitch's anthology and traditional textual monuments have a parallel commemorative function: they "aim . . . to make room for memory not within the landscape so much as within [the viewers] themselves" by transforming the place of reading into a monument.<sup>13</sup>

*Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* emerges from the pages of *The Vanished World* as an "imagined gravestone," a surrogate space for the grieving that usually takes place in built monuments, at tombstones. Like the broken stone memorials now scattered across the Polish countryside, Kacyzne's photograph of cobblestones and crumbling foundations achieves a certain expressive power through the iconography of rubble and rock.<sup>14</sup> The fractured path in this image resonates with a language of ruin and destruction that, in the years since the Holocaust, has come to signify the annihilation of Poland's Jews. Like the broken-stone monuments at Treblinka and Kazimierz, among others, *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* maintains and displays a sense of brokenness by "exhibit[ing] . . . fragments as fragments, never restored wholeness."<sup>15</sup> The pieces of stone imaged along the cobblestone path, in other words, symbolically refer to the impossibility of mending or healing from the loss of the Shoah.

Because most victims were burned in crematoria or thrown carelessly into mass graves after they had been gassed, Kacyzne's photograph also stands, in a post-war context, as a visual allusion to the "missing gravestone syndrome" associated with the Holocaust.<sup>16</sup> Scattered at the road-maker's feet, the stones in this image evoke not only burial slabs and tombstones, but also the Jewish tradition of leaving small rocks in piles along the edges of gravesites. Like the man at the center

11. Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, eds., *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 1, 7.

12. *Ibid.*, 2.

13. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, 149.

14. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 185.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

of the picture who pauses just before he arranges individual pieces of granite into the bare earth, Kacyzne's photograph engages in a process of site-making. It stands in the place of cemeteries in order to celebrate the lives and mark the deaths of countless victims who never received a proper burial.

The readers of *The Vanished World*, visitors to absent gravesites, participate in an act of remembering that is never complete. With each gray pebble, each fractured sliver of granite or marble, the piles of stone swell and spread over the surface of the tombstone. The pages turn, and new meanings emerge from the photographs. These monuments are enduring, unfinished.

### III. Writing in Paths

At the center of Kacyzne's photograph, the old road-maker leans back against his heels. His knees sink into a patch of earth, and wisps of gray hair peek out from beneath the brim of his hat and tangle into a long beard across his chin. Smoothed by heat, wind, and water, the two stones in his hands are soft and dusty against the tips of his fingers. His muscles and tendons curve in response to their contours. He carries their weight like grief.

And like the lines in the palms of his hands, these stones contain histories. They trace paths and open out into "irregular veins branching out in all directions."<sup>17</sup> Beneath their surfaces are ridges left by natural forces, hardened soil stung with rain, the evolution of species, the burden of passing centuries. The old man pauses from his task and gazes calmly into the distance. He leaves crevices between the polished stones along the road. These fissures rip apart like the cracks between lost homelands and a new homes, the gaps between generations.

In this cobblestone road, the stratified layers in the stone, records of lives and histories, volcanic ash and ice, are united by a web of mortar. The spaces between the stones bind pieces of rock together even as they diverge and separate out into a number of fractured trails. Extending back into a small village and forward into the distance, the path in *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* symbolically branches out from the old world into the new. It frames a lost Jewish village in Europe as both a "place where . . . many [traumatic] stories

17. Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones*, trans. Barbara Bray (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 49.

merge” and a “place from which countless other stories emerge and branch out.”<sup>18</sup> In this final section of my study, I explore *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* as a record of loss for Jews who traveled along countless different paths to arrive at their new homes in the United States.

Although Kacyzne himself was unable to escape Nazi-occupied Warsaw, his photograph *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* survives as part of an archive that he completed between 1924 and 1929 for the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society of New York.<sup>19</sup> The specific terms of the commission remain vague, but historian Marek Web suggests that the prints Kacyzne produced for American Jewish organizations reflect an increasing awareness of the political and economic turmoil that was beginning to threaten “Jewish life in the ‘old country.’”<sup>20</sup> Kacyzne himself describes *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* as part of a project to document “all the places in Poland that may be of interest to the reader in America.”<sup>21</sup> It was, however, specifically targeted to immigrant readers of the widely circulated Yiddish-language newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*. Published and disseminated in newsprint, Kacyzne’s image aimed to elicit a nostalgic longing for a lost homeland in homesick viewers, to preserve a sense of an idyllic past that was quickly unraveling in the face of an uncertain future.

*Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* found a different audience—one that included American-born, assimilated Jews in addition to recent migrants and exiles—when it was reprinted and reframed as a Holocaust monument in *The Vanished World*. Kacyzne’s photograph stands, in this context, as a monument to unthinkable loss for an increasingly diverse Jewish community. I argue, however, that it maintains its former resonances as a visual conduit back to a lost homeland. Indeed, drawing from Laura Levitt’s 2007 study *American Jewish Loss After the Holocaust*, I suggest that *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* creates a “legitimate, morally permissible route” to explore migration, assimilation, and other everyday legacies of Jewish loss that have largely been disregarded and eclipsed by the devastating legacy of the Holocaust.<sup>22</sup> Like the cobblestone path, the sedimentary layers, and the cracks that split apart and join together, the image allows for a range of

18. Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 13.

19. Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, xv–xvii.

20. Alter Kacyzne, *Polyn: Jewish Life in the Old Country*, ed. Marek Web (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), xxv.

21. *Ibid.*, xvii.

22. Laura Levitt, *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), 24.

ordinary losses to interconnect with, and exist alongside, the catastrophic trauma of the Holocaust.

Containing an array of stones strewn over an incomplete path and an old Jewish man in the midst of a routine task of manual labor, Kacyzne's photograph alludes both to fractured vestiges of death and destruction and to themes of road-building and rebuilding. As an imagined cemetery, a record of a once-vibrant community that no longer exists, and a visual channel for coping with legacies of loss, *Old Road-Maker in Ostroleka, Poland* offers a flicker of hope for a "new chapter" in the history of Jewish culture.<sup>23</sup> Taking on complex meanings for survivors, exiles, recent immigrants, and assimilated American Jews, Kacyzne's photograph provides raw materials for remembering and reconstruction, for "living and for living on" in an unfamiliar land.<sup>24</sup> ■

23. Abramovitch, ed., *The Vanished World*, 10.

24. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5.