

Memory Activism: case study of Poland

Research Methodology

The research was designed as a qualitative exploratory study aimed at understanding the motivations, values, practices, and challenges of individuals engaged in preserving and promoting the memory of Jewish life and the Holocaust in contemporary Poland. Rather than measuring predefined indicators, the study sought to reconstruct the lived experiences of memory activists and to identify common patterns across highly diverse forms of civic engagement.

The empirical material consisted of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews (including one interview conducted with two participants simultaneously), each lasting up to two hours. In total, 21 respondents participated in the research, including 13 women and 8 men. The interviews allowed participants to reflect not only on their current activities but also on their personal motivations, biographies, ethical commitments, and visions for the future of remembrance work.

The sample was constructed purposively to capture the diversity of contemporary Jewish memory activism in Poland. Participants represented organizations of different sizes, including small grassroots initiatives, medium-sized organizations, and large institutions. Geographically, the study covered activists from several regions of Poland, representing both metropolitan centres and small towns. Particular attention was paid to balancing respondents from different local contexts, as local history proved to be a crucial factor shaping remembrance practices.

The sample also reflected diversity in terms of cultural background. Seven interviewees identified as Jewish, while thirteen came from non-Jewish backgrounds. This distinction proved important in understanding the plurality of motivations behind memory activism and demonstrated that preserving Jewish heritage has increasingly become a shared civic responsibility extending beyond Jewish communities themselves.

The interviews covered a broad range of activities, including historical research, archival work, cemetery preservation, conservation of Jewish heritage sites, educational programmes, artistic projects, commemorative initiatives, genealogy, work with descendants of Polish Jews, publications, digital storytelling, festivals, public events, and social media engagement. This diversity allowed the research to capture memory activism not as a single type of activity but as a multidimensional field encompassing cultural production, civic engagement, heritage protection, and human rights advocacy.

Methodologically, the study adopted an interpretative approach. Rather than imposing a predefined definition of "memory activism," respondents were first invited to define the concept themselves. This strategy revealed that participants understood memory activism

through multiple overlapping dimensions: education, social responsibility, historical justice, local identity, democratic values, community building, and resistance to historical distortion. Instead of representing a clearly bounded category, memory activism emerged as a constellation of practices connected by shared ethical commitments.

Throughout the analytical process, particular attention was given to recurring narratives, shared metaphors, and emotional structures appearing across interviews. Although participants differed significantly in age, institutional affiliation, geographical location, and professional background, their testimonies demonstrated remarkable consistency regarding the values motivating their work and the challenges they encountered. These common themes formed the basis for the analytical synthesis presented below.

Main Findings

Memory activism begins with empathy

Perhaps the strongest finding emerging from the study is that memory activism is fundamentally driven by empathy rather than professional obligation. Most participants described their work not as employment but as a moral responsibility arising from an inability to accept silence, forgetting, or historical erasure.

Many interviewees spoke about experiencing a profound emotional reaction when encountering abandoned Jewish cemeteries, neglected heritage sites, forgotten names, or erased histories. These encounters frequently became turning points that transformed passive historical interest into long-term civic engagement. Participants repeatedly described feeling compelled to "do something" once they became aware of the scale of historical absence.

Consequently, memory activism appears less as a professional specialization than as an ethical response to perceived injustice.

Education as the foundation of remembrance

Education emerged as one of the central dimensions of memory activism. Participants consistently viewed remembrance as a form of public education aimed at restoring knowledge about the multicultural history of Poland and addressing persistent historical ignorance.

Importantly, education was understood not simply as transmitting historical facts but as creating emotional understanding. Interviewees emphasized that presenting the Holocaust solely through statistics risks abstraction. Instead, they sought to restore individual biographies, names, families, professions, and everyday lives, thereby transforming anonymous victims into recognizable human beings.

The research demonstrates that activists deliberately move away from numerical representations of the Holocaust toward personalized narratives capable of generating empathy and ethical reflection.

Restoring Poland's multicultural history

Another major finding concerns the activists' determination to reconstruct the multicultural history of Poland. Respondents repeatedly stressed that the history of Polish Jews is inseparable from the history of Poland itself.

Many participants described discovering only in adulthood that significant proportions of their hometowns' pre-war populations had been Jewish. This delayed realization often became the catalyst for their later engagement. Participants interpreted this absence of knowledge not simply as an educational gap but as evidence of broader mechanisms of historical suppression operating throughout the communist period and, in some cases, continuing within contemporary public discourse.

For many activists, therefore, remembrance is not merely about commemorating the Holocaust but about restoring a more complete and historically accurate understanding of Polish society before the Second World War.

Local memory as civic responsibility

The study also highlights the strongly local character of memory activism. Most initiatives originate within specific communities and focus on recovering forgotten local histories rather than producing national narratives.

Participants often described themselves as guardians of places rather than professional historians. Their work includes documenting former Jewish neighbourhoods, caring for cemeteries, identifying forgotten burial sites, organizing commemorative ceremonies, collecting oral histories, and reconnecting descendants of Polish Jews with their ancestral towns.

This emphasis on locality reflects an understanding that meaningful remembrance grows from concrete places and personal relationships rather than abstract historical discourse.

Memory activism and democratic values

Although interviewees focused primarily on Jewish heritage, they consistently connected remembrance with broader contemporary concerns regarding democracy, human rights, and minority protection.

Many respondents argued that Holocaust education provides an essential framework for understanding mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination, and dehumanization that continue to shape contemporary societies. Several explicitly linked remembrance work with advocacy for minority rights, arguing that knowledge about the Holocaust should strengthen public sensitivity toward racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and discrimination against other marginalized groups.

Rather than treating Holocaust memory as exclusively historical, participants viewed it as an essential resource for democratic citizenship.

Beyond victimhood: emphasizing living Jewish culture

An important and particularly innovative finding concerns participants' rejection of portraying Jewish history exclusively through the lens of destruction.

Interviewees expressed concern that many commemorative practices unintentionally "freeze" Jewish culture in the past by focusing exclusively on the shtetl, the Holocaust, or destroyed communities. Several respondents described this as a form of "second death" that overlooks the survival and continuing development of Jewish life.

Consequently, many activists intentionally incorporate contemporary Jewish culture into their work by promoting Israeli literature, contemporary art, music, festivals, educational programmes, and encounters with present-day Jewish communities. The objective is not simply to commemorate what has been lost but also to recognize Jewish culture as dynamic, evolving, and alive.

Building relationships rather than monuments

The interviews suggest that contemporary remembrance increasingly prioritizes relationships over monuments.

Participants frequently described their work as creating connections: between local communities and descendants of Polish Jews, between historical sites and present-day residents, between schools and heritage organizations, and between different generations. Heritage buildings are restored not simply as museums but as active community centres hosting concerts, workshops, educational activities, and public discussions.

Similarly, respondents emphasized that caring for Jewish cemeteries serves not only to preserve historical sites but also to maintain future possibilities for descendants seeking the graves of their ancestors.

This relational approach represents a significant shift from static models of commemoration toward participatory and community-oriented remembrance.

Memory activism as both inspiration and burden

While participants often described profound satisfaction derived from their work, the research also reveals the considerable personal costs associated with memory activism.

Many respondents recalled transformative moments that initiated their engagement—encounters with abandoned cemeteries, neglected gravestones, or forgotten places that fundamentally altered their life trajectories. These experiences frequently carried strong emotional and sometimes spiritual significance.

However, activists also spoke extensively about loneliness, financial uncertainty, institutional indifference, and the difficulty of mobilizing local communities. Many described feeling isolated during the early stages of their initiatives, lacking both partners and sustainable funding. Others emphasized the emotional burden of continuously working with traumatic histories while confronting public misunderstanding or resistance.

The study therefore portrays memory activism not only as civic engagement but also as emotionally demanding care work requiring considerable resilience.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that memory activism in Poland constitutes far more than the preservation of historical heritage. It represents a complex form of civic engagement situated at the intersection of history, ethics, education, community development, and democratic values.

Across diverse organizations and local contexts, participants shared a remarkably coherent understanding of remembrance as an active process of restoring erased histories, challenging historical silences, rebuilding social relationships, and creating more inclusive futures. Their activities extend well beyond commemorating the Holocaust, encompassing the recovery of multicultural histories, protection of Jewish heritage, promotion of living Jewish culture, and strengthening of democratic resilience.

The study ultimately suggests that contemporary memory activism is less concerned with preserving the past for its own sake than with using historical awareness as a foundation for building more open, empathetic, and pluralistic societies. In this sense, memory activists emerge not only as custodians of heritage but also as agents of social change whose work bridges historical scholarship, civic participation, and ethical responsibility.

This research was published within the framework of the project *Rescue Memory - Activism, Arts and Public Remembrance (ReActMem)* was funded by the European Union under the CERV programme (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) in years 2024-2026. See more: <https://reactmem.difficultheritage.eu/en/homepage-2/>

Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. The European Union cannot be held responsible for them.