
The Job Was Being Done

A Conversation About Dominika Macocha's Video-Sculptural Installation $50^{\circ}31'29.7''N$ $22^{\circ}46'39.1''E$, $50^{\circ}30'56.2''N$ $22^{\circ}46'01.0''E$, $50^{\circ}30'41.0''N$ $22^{\circ}45'49.5''E$

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Abstract: This article is a record of a discussion concerning Dominika Macocha's video-sculptural installation $50^{\circ}31'29.7''N$ $22^{\circ}46'39.1''E$, $50^{\circ}30'56.2''N$ $22^{\circ}46'01.0''E$, $50^{\circ}30'41.0''N$ $22^{\circ}45'49.5''E$. The work deals with the uses of discourse and landscapes in mechanisms of camouflaging the crimes perpetrated on Jews by Poles during the Holocaust. The author lays bare and deconstructs these mechanisms – above all the mechanisms of narrative fetishism and of production of artificial landscape – drawing on examples from Biłgoraj County. In the course of the discussion, the work inspired a critical reassessment of the categories dominating the ways in which the Holocaust is currently described: (1) Martin Pollack's category of contaminated landscapes, rooted in the ideology of two totalitarianisms; (2) the category of the witness / bystander, which conceals the observers' participation in the scenario of the crime; and (3) the category of taboo, which is ambivalent considering the universal knowledge on the part of local communities about what happened to Jews from their localities. Reflection on the production of taboo leads the discussants to deliberate on the status of Jewish sources in the field of Holocaust studies. Collected from the 1940s onward, and containing ample and detailed information about Polish crimes perpetrated on Jews, they are nevertheless not recognised as sources by Polish historians. The conversation is concluded by an attempt at recapitulating the present condition of Polish historiography in the light of the postulated new approach to sources.

Keywords: Dominika Macocha; antisemitism; taboo; witness; bystander; contaminated landscapes; Martin Pollack; Holocaust; narrative fetishism

Landscape as Camouflage

Elżbieta Janicka: Now that the Forest Gallery exists, opening the core exhibition at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, every self-respecting statement about Jews in the dominant Polish narrative begins with the forest. When I first entered the POLIN Museum and saw the forest from a distance, I thought that things were made clear right from the very beginning. We are in the place-and-time-after-the-Shoah. The Holocaust of Polish Jews is not Auschwitz but the forest. A place of non-burial. *Hortus Judeorum*. The forest landscape is the site and the instrument of the crime, which was also perpetrated by Poles, because – just as the entire history of Jews in Poland – it happened within the frame that was the antisemitic dominant culture. Meanwhile, the Forest Gallery sends a completely opposite message. And the lie at the beginning portends the principle followed further on in the exhibition. *The Mystery of a Forest Lakelet*

shows that stories about local history are socially constructed. The area of Biłgoraj, on which Macocha's work focuses, is an emblematic example of the mechanism that can be described as follows: to talk about something with the sole purpose of not saying what really happened. A mechanism based on employing an ersatz. Instead of talking about a bunker in which Jews were murdered, there is talk of a little church that collapsed into the ground. The artist performs a Hamlet-like gesture: she refuses to accept the collective lie and proceeds to reveal it. But the sheer deconstruction of the dominant narrative is not enough to reach the truth. Everybody knows about the crime and who committed it, but people continue to live under the pressure of the accomplices' narrative. Hence, they are unable to reveal the truth.

I like the fact that the artist is present in her video-sculptural installation through her own biography: Biłgoraj is her home town, which she mentions in the project description. I also appreciate that the process of producing the work forms its integral part. Macocha describes in detail how she made the shrine as well as the materials that she used.

Then there is the motif of Polish complicity in the murders. We learn about the act of burning Jews by Poles and about a Polish denunciation, among other facts. But above all, this work makes us see how the phantasm works: the interviewees don't see the reality because they look at it through the prism of antisemitic clichés.

The drawback of the work, however, lies in its interpretative framework based on Martin Pollack's concept of "contaminated landscapes" (Pollack, 2014b; original German edition: Pollack, 2014a), which blurs the specificity and unprecedented character of the Shoah. Pollack writes: "contaminated landscapes can obviously be found not only in Europe but also in other parts of the world – in Africa, Asia, Latin America. They are in all those places where mass murders were committed and where perpetrators immediately buried the corpses or hid them in a different way" (Pollack, 2014b, pp. 21–22). He therefore doesn't concentrate on landscapes of the Holocaust but on "landscapes that hide mass graves" (Pollack, 2014b, p. 20), which "are supposed to become invisible to strangers, submerged in the landscape, become one with the landscape. Nothing should suggest that people are buried here" (Pollack, 2014b, p. 27). What I find irritating is not just Pollack's juggling of numbers in problematizing the term "mass graves", but also how he does it,¹ as though the murdered individuals were not people.

Pollack levels fundamental differences between crimes. He professes the ideology of "two totalitarianisms", equating Nazi and communist crimes, and, drawing on the presence of dead bodies in the same landscape, he equalises in a certain way the fate of victims and perpetrators. He enumerates Babi Yar and Katyn in one breath, knowing full well it's inappropriate, especially from his perspective as the son of a Nazi perpetrator.

1 Pollack writes: "This also invites the question about when we can talk about a mass grave. How many corpses are necessary to justify this term? Ten? Twenty? Fifty? One hundred? Or more? The number of graves lost somewhere in the landscape in which 'only' three or four dead of unknown origin rest is beyond doubt much greater" (Pollack, 2014b, p. 34).



Martin Pollack
Skazone krajobrazy



Cover art for the Polish edition of Martin Pollack's *Contaminated Landscapes* (Pollack, 2014b)

In order to safeguard himself from potential accusations of relativising German Nazi crimes, he uses the method of rhetorical questions which he himself answers, assuring the readers that his point is not at all to diminish the Holocaust or to question the uniqueness of the Shoah (Pollack, 2014b, p. 26).

I understand that one of Macocha's sources of inspiration was the following appeal made by Pollack: "We should try to determine what those towns looked like at the time and what they look like today. This is important for forming one's picture of contaminated landscapes" (Pollack, 2014b, p. 43). But the question is: from what perspective are these landscapes "contaminated"? In the third chapter of his book, Pollack writes that he first became aware of "contaminated landscapes" while travelling around Western Ukraine to visit the site of a Holocaust crime, a site of *La Shoah par balles* (Patrick Debois). He quotes the tirade of a peasant who complains that the soil where Jews were buried "no longer wanted to yield crop" (Pollack, 2014b, p. 91), that dead Jews make soil infertile and bring misfortune on peasants. Thus, we are presented with the perspective of the non-Jewish environment. Using the example of the Austrian tradition, Pollack indicates that we're dealing here with an old antisemitic topos, constructed and disseminated through adages and proverbs. Instead of deconstructing the phantasmal dimension of the concept of "contaminated landscapes" and expelling – *verwerfen* in the language of psychoanalysis² – that notion from the symbolic order, he uses it as a term to describe and analyse reality (Pollack, 2014b, p. 99). Furthermore, I am not convinced by the concept of "short memory of the forest": the forest has no agency, people have agency.

Xawery Stańczyk: We're talking mainly about the film, but the film is a part of a larger whole, defined by the artist as a video-sculptural installation. I watched the film several times, both on a laptop and on a TV to see how my reception changed depending on the size of the screen. In the gallery, the film is projected on a white wall, and the impression must be even more powerful, especially since the hall with the scattered cut-up fragments of the reconstructed shrine is plunged in darkness. I take this as a guideline about how the film should be watched. I find the artist's description concerning the shrine equally important:

Crafted from MDF, [the shrine] was then divided into eight parts. MDF is a material used in mass production, and it is precisely its universality, just like the prevalence of defence mechanisms against painful historical facts, that I find to be of special significance. The object is a mock-up, a model of highly complicated social behaviour, and this complexity has been emphasised by the division of the sculpture. (Macocha, 2020)

The artist describes the production process as analogous to the process of constructing the legend about the little church. This is an important hint for me.

2 The German word *verwerfen* means 'to reject something in such a way so as not to consider it anymore'. As Slavoj Žižek writes, "*Verwerfung* (foreclosure, rejection/repudiation) [...] is a more radical move than repression (*Verdrängung*). [...] In contrast to this, foreclosure rejects the term from the symbolic *tout court*" (Žižek, 2008, p. 216).

As for the film itself, I was struck by the double artificiality of the image – similarly to MDF, which is produced “by hard pressing wood fibres with the addition of organic binding and hardening compounds, and applying high temperature” (Macocho, 2020). The image of the forest is fabricated in a double sense. First of all, contrary to the recurring quotes about the forest’s short memory – this phrase appears not only in the quote from Martin Pollack’s text, but also from Oksana Zabuzhko’s book – the forest we see in the film is not old, historical, “natural” at all. Quite the opposite: the forest is several decades old, it was planted by human hands after the war. Each of the trees is like the other, they grow at equal intervals, the borders between species are clear. This forest has no memory because it’s simply young. We’re talking about the naturally significant areas of the Solska Forest, yet many artificial plantings took place there after the war. So the film does not feature an old-growth forest with gigantic trees, but pines that are forty or perhaps fifty years old. This is the first level of artificiality.

The second one concerns the fabricating of the image. All these static shots have an amazing depth of field, they are sharp and luminous. Nobody sees the forest like this. We wouldn’t see this with the naked eye. It’s an imagined landscape. Macocha writes of landscape as camouflage in the text accompanying her work. In this case, the camouflage serves to cover the murder of Jews by Poles during the occupation. She reveals this camouflage by showing not only an artificial forest but also an artificial perspective of looking at it.

While wondering what convention of imaging is represented here, I found links with photography of nature and travel photography (*fotografia krajoznawcza*). But this is not a direct reference to Jan Bułhak’s *Fatherland Photography*. That current highlighted the national, traditional, Polish character of landscape. The artist makes an opposite gesture: she demonstrates its artificiality. Sharpening the perspective serves to emphasise that this sharpness won’t help us, we won’t see anything there. Light will also be of no use: it doesn’t illuminate, it blinds. That’s why Macocha’s shots make me think not about *Fatherland Photography* but rather about modern-day regional promotional brochures, tourist photography, video clips shot by the self-government regional authorities in order to attract tourists, and travel albums created by local nature lovers. This is the convention of a promotional campaign. I think Macocha makes a conscious use of it.

Fatherland Photography

E.J.: I agree with Xawery that the landscape was produced here and serves as a camouflage, and Dominika Macocha makes subversive use of the poetics of the region’s promotional activities. These are shots from a calendar. And they don’t stand in contrast to *Fatherland Photography*, which developed in Poland as a copy of the German *Hei-*

matphotographie. In 1935, President of the Association of Photographic Societies in Germany, Paul Lüking, a professor, presented to the Polish photographic milieu the programme of *Heimatphotographie*, already harnessed for official Nazi propaganda. It wouldn't have taken off, of course, if it hadn't fallen on fertile ground. Fatherland Photography was used to present multi-ethnic, multi-national and multi-religious territories of prewar Poland as mono-ethnic, mono-national and mono-religious ones, or – at most - ones hospitable under certain conditions to obedient others. Look at today's projects by Krzysztof Hejke. All those albums of his: *Polska romantyczna* [Romantic Poland], *Tam gdzie lwowskie śpią Orleńta* [Where the Lviv Eaglets Sleep], *Kresy – zapomniana ojczyzna* [The Borderlands – Forgotten Fatherland], *Prawdziwa Polska* [True Poland] (Hejke, 1994, 2001, 2006a, 2006b) and so on. The style and technique are different than in the past, but the production of national identity proceeds in the same way.

The so-called fatherland landscape was a vision of reality inconsistent with reality. The more accepted that vision became, the greater the aggression stirred by the reality that contradicted it. That was just one step away from adjusting reality to the vision, not at the expense of the vision, however, but at the expense of reality. We have loads of such fatherland landscape. Bułhak had to bend over backwards for its sake in Lower Silesia after the war, when he sought to demonstrate the perennial Polishness of the “Recovered Territories” restored to the Motherland. But the Polonisation process was not genocidal there, whereas the so-called typical Polish landscape elsewhere obscures the crimes against Jews which build it: the crimes of “purging the landscape” of Jews. “Fatherland landscape” is both a means of production and a product of crime.

The concept of the contamination of landscape originates from such thinking. In *Contaminated Landscapes*, Pollack made use of it without disrupting the mental automatism involved. What's more, the photograph on the cover inscribes itself into the dominant context of reception in Poland: contamination persists, it's just that it is no longer caused by living but by dead Jews. Due to foreign violence, of course. Depoliticisation, a lack of a metalevel and of critical reflection, is the general principle of Pollack's text and its vector is familiar, to say the least. Pollack withdraws from the differentiation between communism and Stalinism, adopted in the European debate. He also fails to pose any obstacles to the so-called double genocide theory, which underpins the figure of two totalitarianisms. Finally, he diligently effaces the transcultural and transnational specificity of antisemitism by depicting an undifferentiated turmoil in which everybody murders everybody. Snyder's methodology and axiology reign here (cf. Snyder, 2010): “Such names as Babi Yar, Katyn, Kurapaty, Biłżernieki, Huda Jama and Paneriai, used interchangeably, refer to hundreds of other places in Central and Eastern Europe” (Pollack, 2014b, 30). Pollack denies that knowledge about the Holocaust poses any kind of obstacle to him: “Each event should be examined separately” (Pollack, 2014b, p. 26). Still, he writes about all the events in one breath as if they formed a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass, while the postulate of examining things separately produces the im-

pression that they are devoid of links and meanings. This generates chaos and a narrative void, which gives way to the narrative solutions prevailing outside the text, even if the author declaratively repudiates them.

X.S.: My impression is that Fatherland Photography was ostentatious in showing that the landscape was Polish, “ours”, national. Meanwhile, this more contemporary convention, in the tourist-promotional form, is not as ostentatious because some landscapes have already been anchored in the social imagination as national landscapes and there’s no need to emphasise that: the viewers are taught to recognise them as such. The area chosen in Dominika Macocha’s work is not accidental. It’s Roztocze, an emblematic landscape of Polishness. While preparing for our meeting I refreshed my memory of Tim Edensor’s book *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Edensor, 2002). One of its chapters is devoted to geography and national landscape. Edensor writes about how rural landscapes, portrayed as “natural”, are in fact related to the construct of national authenticity set in opposition to what’s urban and modern.

European nations, whose emergence is in many cases coterminous with the development of modern romanticism, are clothed in this rhetoric of the rural, a rural which most frequently encapsulates the *genius loci* of the nation, the place from which we have sprung, where our essential national spirit resides. (Edensor, 2002, p. 40)

Edensor adds that in the contemporary era, these “iconic, privileged landscapes are continually recirculated through popular culture”, including tourist campaigns, while being conserved at the same time as national parks (Edensor, 2002, p. 40), precisely as in the case of the Roztocze National Park or the Solska Forest Landscape Park. Aside from the shrine and a freshly chopped down tree stump, the only sign of people’s presence in Macocha’s film is an overhead power line, but it’s not even that hard to overlook it. There’s no need to show national architecture or other elements of tradition. There’s no need for anything else to be at play. We know this is Poland. Edensor writes that such rustic landscape can function as a synecdoche of the nation. Macocha adds that it’s a synecdoche of the nation without Jews.

Narrative Fetishism

Konrad Matyjaszek: I’m looking at this film a bit with an amateur eye, I’m not a specialist in studies on photography and I don’t immediately recognise all the visual layers. I perceive the visual side of Dominika Macocha’s project rather as a supplement to the textual layer, which I’d like to discuss in more detail. By quoting in her video work the accounts, stories, legends and voices of people living in the vicinity of the site of the crime, the artist sheds light on this site. In turn, the way in which we find out that a crime, and not a legend, is involved can shed light on the way in which the partici-

pation of Poles and other Christians in the Holocaust of Jews is talked about in Poland and Eastern Europe. The video begins with legends about a lake, a wilderness hut, a little church that collapsed into the ground, an inn, a cloud of dust that emerges in the fields, a motorcycle wheel blocked by magic. We hear about a ghost that haunted the attic. Only after ten or more minutes do we learn that the story in fact concerns a mass murder that was really committed, and we do so from an account read out (probably by the artist herself), not a direct recording of a statement made by a local resident. Rendered in colloquial language, brimming with regionalisms, for some reason that account could not be included directly as a recording. Meanwhile, it is crucial, as its example perfectly shows how complicity in the Holocaust is talked about in Poland. It is done without using the proper words. It's as if all words that name the crime were removed from the sentences that form this statement. What's left are words without meaning, but the story is still an account of a crime. I did an exercise on this text. I rewrote the account and added words that would make the sentences complete in grammatical and linguistic terms. I'll read it out in a moment. In this sense, Macocha's work shows what happens to the story about participation in murders of Jews. The text is secured so that it becomes useless, but keeps conveying content at the same time.

Anna Zawadzka: My attention was also drawn to the language that lacks words that call a spade a spade, but after watching the film we know what happened. "We were with that one. She reported it there. But they didn't do anything because of the shame", we learn from the account quoted. And one more quote from the film: "These ones and those ones, the job was being done on the same day". I'm interested in how it happens that we know what it is all about while listening to it. Where do we know it from? On the grounds of what knowledge? In the 22-minute film the word "Jews" isn't mentioned until the fifteenth minute. When you were watching the film for the first time, at what point did you realise that it was about a crime against Jews? Because you did realise much earlier than in the fifteenth minute, didn't you? When did it become clear for you that it's not a film about a charming legend or an eerie film about ghosts? What were the signals? For me, the cue was the inn.

E.J.: The image of the forest was a warning signal for me. I became certain when I saw the shrine.

X.S.: I cannot point to a specific moment because I'd read the project description before. I'm returning to the fact that the artist created not only the film, but also the whole video-sculptural installation. Seeing a shrine cut into eight parts in the gallery, we guess that it's not going to be yet another film about the beauty of Polish landscape, especially since the artificiality of the landscape is also emphasised by the dimensions of the projected film.

K.S.: I was alarmed by the sentence: "the forest lakelet became a site of eternal rest", as well as later: "something must have been there, something must have been there,

but nobody knew what that was". This sentence means exactly the opposite: everybody knows "what", but for some reason they cannot talk about it.

A.Z.: My second question concerns the status of this narrative as an artistic statement. How can it function? What can be done with it? What is it in the field of Holocaust studies and historiographical studies?

The third question concerns the thesis put forward by Mirosław Tryczyk. Dominika Macocha's film can be interpreted from a psychoanalytical perspective: what is hidden under legends manifests itself in the form of symptoms. The symptom of an individual's tabooed experience is an obsessive-compulsive disorder or neurosis, and at the collective level – legends about tongues of fire or ghosts treading on rafters. In the book *Drzazga. Kłamstwa silniejsze niż śmierć* [Splinter: Lies Stronger than Death], Mirosław Tryczyk writes that people want to get rid of a secret (Tryczyk, 2020). They have a desire to speak the truth and liberate themselves in this way from the burden of a secret to finally feel relief. Do you agree with this interpretation? Do you also believe that people have an unconscious need to speak the truth, a truth which incriminates them because, firstly, it concerns murders of Jews committed by them or their families and, secondly, because of many years of keeping the crime under wraps?

E.J.: I do not share this view. It's founded on a vision of the mythical people – good, or at least sincere and authentic individuals, who want to live in truth, but cannot do so because of an equally phantasmal ruling class, some kind of elites separated and hermetically isolated from the people. Social groups are viewed here as distinct and living in total isolation from one another, whereas in fact they function in a single symbolic universe and form the same social-cultural tissue. So what is it that really makes it impossible to speak the truth if criminal liability is already out of the question? Pasikowski showed this in his film *Aftermath* (Pasikowski, 2012). But it didn't take Pasikowski for everybody to realise, already during the Holocaust, that revealing and acknowledging the way things really were came at the price of a revolution of the entire symbolic order, including individual identities and common, collective identity. A revolution that doesn't spare anything: neither the father, nor the mother, nor tradition and especially religion, nor the landscape. It takes away everything we're made of. It turns everything inside out.

I'm not a big proponent of the division between the people and the elites who refuse to come forward to the people and to listen to them, while the people are longingly awaiting this. Because if the so-called people want to reveal the truth so much, why don't they just do it, why doesn't confession play this role, for example? Why do they invest so much effort, often at the cost of personal sacrifices, in sustaining the Church that has normalised and legitimised the Holocaust with silence and support for the murderers during the Shoah and afterwards? Why, of its own volition, does that *demos* elects from among itself such representatives, and not others? This is not about

factual knowledge but about its further consequences. Macocha's film shows that narrative fetishism, which means an ersatz narrative, is a handy way to avoid working through crimes against Jews. An additional function of the legendary convention is to offer assurance that whatever happened, there's no need to do anything about it. The supernatural factor takes it all upon itself. Will-o'-the-wisps, ghosts and gusts keep watch over the affairs and deliver justice in their own ways.

Macocha's film initially irritated and fatigued me with its lack of precision: the number of victims and the exact number of sites of crime remain unknown. But I later realised that what's at stake here is not specific information about individual murders, but the very fact that they happened and their emblematic character. The artist's work illustrates the rule of the crime and later the mechanism of its discursive, and therefore socio-cultural, processing. It's not a film that lacks precision, it's a film about the lack of precision. Macocha doesn't seek to focus only on the places she personally knows and the bodies of Jews buried there. Her point is that the Polish landscape is made of Jews murdered by Poles.

K.S.: It is similar with the shrine: we never learn who hung it on the tree. Could it have been someone from the local community who wanted to make a memorialising gesture? In the film we also hear a short statement from a man who expresses sympathy: "It was horrible".

E.J.: The artist doesn't go into the details of who installed the shrine on the site of the crime against Jews, or what the intention was behind this gesture. But, again, she points to its emblematic character. Such signs usually appear when there are no other traces of the crime. They can be interpreted in different ways. They often involve appropriation of victims' identities, their Christianisation. Sometimes it's an *apotropaion*, a remedy against Jews. Sometimes it's a thanksgiving votive offering. It's often an affirmation and justification that Jews may have indeed been harmed here, but they were not blameless, or even that they started it, they asked for it, because they killed Christ – "His blood be upon us and on our children" – so justice has been done. Sometimes it's a safe kind of marking of a crime site. Safe for the one who does the marking: it will be understood by those who know about the crime, it won't harm the perpetrators, and for non-locals it will offer chewing gum for the eyes – one way or another, the rhythm of the dominant story remains undisturbed. Cross, crucifix, shrine, Christ, Mother of God – all those are anti-Jewish signs, so the one who marks the site saves his or her affiliation with the community. I wonder if those signs ever get to be used subversively. In that case Christ would symbolise a Jew murdered by the heirs of Rome. But such a manoeuvre was intentionally and openly performed – only and probably exclusively – by Pasikowski in the already-mentioned *Aftermath*.

Getting back to chewing gum for the eyes and the ears, it can become an ally in certain forms of protest. I experienced this in the very region of Roztocze. Travelling on

a PKS coach, I was listening for eight hours to antisemitic stories about Jews, the Holocaust, and what happened later. The only person who didn't take part in the conversation was the driver. When we arrived at the destination, having parked in the middle of a huge puddle, he bid farewell to everybody saying: "How terrible it is that people dealt this fate to people". We realise how empty that phrase can be, how counter-meaningful and even dangerous. But in that case it was the only available gesture of distancing himself from the passengers' stories which that man could use. A gesture calibrated in such a way that he could use it and shield himself with it at the same time. The situation could take an unpredictable course, so the driver was taking a risk – but without burning bridges. After all, he was quoting Nałkowska, a great Polish writer, and *Medallions* is required reading at school. Similarly, when hanging up the shrine, you can always safely backtrack that, after all, it's Jesus or the Virgin Mary, who, by the way, are the only forms of Jewish presence allowed in this culture.

Still, in the situation recorded by Dominika Macocha we're dealing with narrative fetishism. It's just that, on the one hand, the stories and signs that we hear and see in her film veil and mask the crimes. There's no way we can learn from them about the identity of the murderers and the victims. On the other hand, the very appearance of these stories and signs is a signal that the crime did take place and everybody knows about it. Macocha's film shows that everyone in the community, with no exceptions, participated in the crime itself and then participated, and still participates, in the blocking of the possibility of putting the facts into words, and therefore also drawing conclusions from them. It turns out that it is not the truth that makes us free in and of itself, but what is potentially done with it later. After the crime, people still have a choice and they are the subjects of their actions.

What struck me particularly hard was the extent to which the community of knowledge was a Polish-Jewish community, in fact impossible to achieve on any other ground. The completely different stories – the fetishist and essentially denialist Polish legend about the little church, the elliptical-circumlocutory account or pseudo-account: "that's that, then, you know, you get it", and the factual Jewish record of the exhumation with the number of victims provided in the memorial book of Biłgoraj – derive their source from the same matrix of facts known to exactly everyone. Everyone participates in the same *Real*. History is shared. But even without the narrative of the victims, thrown back only on the forest decoration, we can work out the rest. It is like when we enter the Warsaw courtyard with a shrine. So the Polish story, one way or another, veils and unveils at the same time. This fetish is a symptom.

The Production of Taboo

X.S.: Returning to Anna's question, instead of asking about the need to speak the truth, I'd ask about the ways of coping with the taboo. The problem is not that people want to tell the truth. Tabooing is the problem.

E.J.: This is exactly what we see in the film: the active production of a taboo. The production of a mystery. This is not a language of trauma, but one of conspiracy of silence. Konrad was talking about the language used by the film's narrators as being punctured, full of gaps. I get the impression that it's not a defective language or a lack of language. To my mind, it's the establishing of a language and, eventually, a language in its own right. A language that's actually quite efficient as a means of communication. Taboo is a communication code which from the perspective of the creators and users serves the situation efficiently and is adequate to it. The convention of taboo successfully embraces various intentions, needs and stances. It is used even by the man who is the only one in Macocha's film to say "That was horrible". Nobody tries to stop operating the taboo-producing machine that works to the detriment of the victims and in the interest of the perpetrators.

We learn from the project description that the artist reads out statements made by a guide in the film. Why doesn't the guide speak with his or her own voice? Why does he or she remain anonymous? This is the best gauge of the situation. Besides, the statements in the film problematise in explicit terms the physical threat entailed by disclosing the facts. The threat is perceived as deadly – still, eighty years after the actual events. As if the Holocaust had never ended. As if the war still continued. I think that the guide refused to speak with his or her own voice because he or she would have been recognised by the locals, just like the daughter of Antonina and Aleksander Wyrzykowski from Janczewek near Jedwabne, who agreed to appear in the documentary film *Neighbours* but with her back to the camera (Arnold, 2001). Her parents rescued seven Jews from Jedwabne. And she, even though she was a child at the time, carries the stigma until today. Although she and her whole family left her birthplace long ago, at any moment she can be held to account for her parents' actions, which are considered reprehensible also in other places in Poland. The anonymisation of the key informants reveals the balance of forces that still persists, and therefore also the state of the society and culture. The punctured language doesn't exist in a void. Its referents include not only the crime but also the social relations that distribute legitimacy and determine who's afraid of whom.

K.M.: Dominika Macocha's work reveals the following sequence: at the beginning we know nothing about the crime, later we find out that there was a crime, and at the end we still don't know anything about it. You've said, Elżbieta, that hearing about the will-o'-the-wisps on the marshes we can guess the rest. In my opinion we can do so only

when we have the necessary preparation and knowledge. Certain signs – an inn in the middle of the forest, a shrine in the courtyard – trigger a warning sign in your mind, provided that you know what they portend. But if we're only fed promotional brochures, we don't necessarily have to know anything. Although Macocha's work is an attempt at unveiling a narrative structure, and the artist lays out all the pieces of the shrine jigsaw puzzle, if we don't have the background knowledge about the mechanisms and scale of Poles' participation in the Holocaust, we'll just fall back on the first available interpretation: listening to Poles talking about this crime, we will encounter impartial witnesses, who are the only source of knowledge and bear testimony to the suffering of Jews.

In order to show what this risk involves, I'd like to read out – on the third level of mediation – what the artist read out, and then do it again but in a version in which I fill in the missing words.

They were sitting there, they had a sawmill, and here, in Wola, there was a sawmill, on this river. They brought it over, they made it, and that's it. On 20 July the war ended. Right at the end of the war they were killed off. They kept it, and those were the richest ones. And nothing grows here. They paid, they had a bit, and that family that was there, they had money buried somewhere else. They killed for that bit of money. They didn't find the money, of course. He says, when they came, some two weeks before the death he says. He says: in case someone finds, it's buried. We only have a bit on us to pay for food. This money's lying somewhere, hell knows where. Who knew? If we'd known, we'd have gone there and dug it out. When he was looking there, the one with a detector, he didn't find it. A Jew wouldn't hide the money close by. And it stank after the war for like seven years. They froze in winter, and later it decomposed. When the ice broke, then it stank. Those bones are there for sure. But when you're in a bunker, some rags can be thrown in there, set on fire, and that's it. You think you won't get poisoned? We were with that one. She reported it there. But they didn't do anything because of the shame. But they reported it to Lublin and that was the end of the whole business. If you report it in Poland, they won't give it away, you know what I mean. Poles killed those Jews, the Volksdeutsche. They did the same job, they did this job here and there.

And my complemented interpretation (I wrote the filled in words in upper case):

They JEWS were sitting there IN THE BUNKER, they had a sawmill, and here, in Wola, there was THEIR sawmill, on this river. They brought WOOD over, they made THE BUNKER, and that's it. On 20 July the war ended. Right at the end of the war JEWS were killed off BY POLES. JEWS kept THE MONEY, and those were the richest JEWS. And nothing grows here. JEWS paid THE MONEY TO POLES AS RANSOM, they had a bit OF MONEY, and that JEWISH family that was HERE, they had money buried somewhere else. POLES killed THEM for that bit of money. THE POLES didn't find the money, of course. THE MURDERER says, when POLES came TO SELL FOOD, some two weeks before the death THE JEW says. He says: in case someone ELSE finds US AND WANTS TO REPORT US TO THE GERMANS, MONEY FOR THE RANSOM is buried. We only have a bit OF MONEY on us to pay YOU for food. This OTHER money's lying somewhere, hell knows where. Who knew? If we'd known, we'd have gone there and dug it out. When he was looking there, the one with a detector, he didn't find it. A Jew wouldn't hide the money close by. And it stank after the war for like seven years. The BODIES OF THE KILLED froze in winter, and later it decomposed. When the ice broke, then it stank. Those bones are there for sure. But when you're in a bunker, some rags can be thrown in there BY POLES, set on fire, and that's it. You think you won't get poisoned? We were with that JEWISH WOMAN WHO SURVIVED. She reported THE MURDER TO THE POLICE. But the

POLICE didn't do anything because of the shame, BECAUSE THEY KNEW THE MURDERERS. But they, THE POLICEMEN, reported it AND PASSED THE FILES OF THE CASE to Lublin and that was the end of the whole business. NOTHING WAS DONE FURTHER. If you report MURDER OF A JEW in Poland, THE AUTHORITIES won't give it away, THEY WON'T DO ANYTHING WITH THE REPORT, you know what I mean. Poles killed those Jews, the Volksdeutsche, OR NOT THE VOLKSDEUTSCHE BUT OUR NEIGHBOURS. They did the same job, SELLING FOOD AND KILLING THOSE IN HIDING, they did this job here and there.

I haven't changed anything in the original text. All I've done is add what follows from the knowledge I gained while working with the Holocaust histories. If I hadn't done that work and didn't have the professional background, I probably wouldn't be able to fill the gaps in this narrative. Narrative gaps are one of the mechanisms that make the debate on the participation of Poles in the Holocaust collapse in front our eyes. And this particular story may collapse along with it. The words I tried to add will become permanently erased, and Macocha's film will gain the status of yet another testimony by a Polish witness concerning a crime committed by unidentified perpetrators, probably Germans or people aspiring to become German.

E.J.: It seems to me that the words "they did the same job here and there" refer to the fact that two out of three groups of Jews talked about in the film were killed by the same murderers, who belong to the community that knows everything about them, and who know everything about that community. It's highly likely that those Volksdeutsche were people like the Biłgoraj Gestapo. The two Gestapo officers who wreaked the greatest havoc in the city and the area – real Gestapo officers, real officers of the authentic Geheime Staatspolizei – were called Stanisław Majewski and Stanisław Mroziak. In Macocha's film, this part of the story seems to be told from the perspective of someone to whom Jews would come to buy food. Perhaps it was heard from those who sold that food. The person sincerely regrets the money still owned by Jews which was not seized by Poles. So much for the personal attitude to the crime, a multiple crime.

On another note, money appears here as an attribute of Jews – "A Jew wouldn't hide the money close by" – although having money was a necessary condition for Jews to stay alive among Christians, not only during the Holocaust. In turn, the words "They killed for that bit of money" serve to rationalise the murder. Money and possessions were taken away from Jews in hiding, if not by threat then by torture, which required time, and there was no longer time as the war front was approaching. When Germans were still there, Poles reaped material, and probably not only material, benefits from Jews, but once the Germans were leaving, the most important thing was to kill Jews in time because very soon it might be too late. The so-called robbery motive is yet another fetish that masks the main, antisemitic, motive of the crime.

And it's true that the debate is collapsing. In fact, it has already collapsed. The twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Neighbors* (Gross, 2000, 2001) passed unnoticed and without any summaries. Even *Gazeta Wyborcza* glosses over books by Gross today

(Gross, 2019a, 2019b; Gross & Pawlicka, 2018), thus actually coming back to the starting point, because it began by glossing over him. And before the newspaper went mute, it organised a bashing of Gross, which dovetailed with the double – parliamentary and presidential – victory of the party that has since ruled without interruption. However, detailed knowledge – who, when, with what and where chopped off the head of a Jewish acquaintance, female or male – still exists. And if it's becoming effaced, it happens very slowly. What's not becoming effaced is the general knowledge about what happened and what are the implications. Emotions are extremely heated. Otherwise there would be no denialist politics of memory, which tells this story through its opposite and offers an infallible political tool. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews would be the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and not a rescue operation code-named POLIN Museum, that is Poland Museum, which restores the antisemitic lie indispensable for "Poland for Poles" to survive. The crime produced by the antisemitic identity produces this identity in return.

The Pacification of Jewish Testimonies

K.S.: The thread that caught my interest in the film concerns the wartime Polish-German collaboration. I think that Macocha's work shows that Poles, just like other societies in countries under German occupation, participated in the genocide, in the German project that involved the plan to murder all Jews without exception. The effectiveness of the annihilation of the whole Jewish community came as a result of the fact that everybody – not just the occupiers – agreed that Jews must die. An antisemitic consensus existed, not only in German society. Taking into account the sociological conclusion that an attitude does not automatically lead to an action, it is worth reflecting on the effectiveness of this consensus. Numerous Jewish testimonies and academic Holocaust studies show that in Europe during the occupation the approach and behaviour of the non-Jewish environment became a decisive factor behind the effectiveness of the Nazi project of persecuting and murdering all Jews without exception. As for the attitude of the vast majority of Polish society to Jews, Jan T. Gross proved in 1986 that in Poland under occupation – apart from some exceptions, including communist newspapers – "the whole underground press demonstrates a more or less antisemitic attitude" (Gross, 1986, p. 25). This approach did not come like a bolt from the blue. According to Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski, attitudes to Jews during the Holocaust "reflected the code of Polish culture, shaped much earlier" (Janicka & Żukowski, 2016, p. 16).³ Before

3 "The phantasms of liquidation had been articulated in Poland already before the war and prepared the social imagination for what was to happen in the 1940s [...]. Even children knew about it" (Janicka & Żukowski, 2016, p. 16). Janicka and Żukowski refer to Maria Janion's work. Janicka situates the Holocaust in the antisemitic continuum: "The history of the Holocaust as an idea begins with antisemitism" (Janicka, 2008, p. 239).

the German occupation Jews were already isolated in Polish society and “carried a stigma” (Goffman, 1986, p. 35) stemming from the perspective of the majority, according to which Jews were not people.

Coming back to Gross, it seems to me that Macocha returns to his question raised in 1986: “What is the reason, let’s finally ask, why Jews are usually stiff with outrage when recalling what happened between them and Poles during the war, and Poles usually prefer not to talk about it?” (Gross, 1986, p. 24).

The artist shows that the narrative of camouflage cannot be destroyed. One may try to reassemble it or take it apart, but because everyone participates in it, there’s no way it can be permanently eradicated, as the Catholic-Polish identity is at stake in its survival. There must have been someone in Smólsko who helped Jews and was later betrayed. Why can’t one be on the side of those who helped? Or at least didn’t want to murder Jews?

A.Z.: The film features a quote from the memorial book of Bitgoraj, a Jewish testimony of victims and survivors, which runs counter to the narrative of the dominant group. This is the only moment in the film when we learn something specific: “In Kociołki, between the two villages of Smólsko (Smólsko Małe and Smólsko Duże), a grave was found underwater with bodies of nearly twenty people deposited in rows, one on top of another. Because of humidity, all the dead formed a single mass and had to be taken out with pitchforks” (<https://vimeo.com/490694575>). So, on the one hand, we’re witnessing the production of taboo, which you’ve mentioned. But on the other hand, everything is said in plain terms. Written down. The words that Konrad added to the story full of gaps appear here. Calling a spade a spade. So how is it that the record in the Jewish memorial book does not interfere with the dominant narrative? Why does it fail to disturb the production of the taboo? My question concerns the status of the Jewish narrative in the context of the hegemonic discourse. Macocha’s work shows that it is particularised and marginalised to such an extent that nobody treats it seriously, including historians.

K.M.: First of all, it’s obscene, to such a degree that it stands lower in the hierarchy of credibility than the ghost whose steps can be heard in the attic. It has no legitimacy. This can be seen very well in the example of Mordechai Tsanin’s book *Przez ruiny i zgliszcz* [Through Ruins and Rubble] (Canin, 2018). In the book review in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, published shortly after it was actually released in 2019, Halina Bortnowska employed the whole arsenal of Polish culture to secure and disarm Tsanin’s eyewitness testimony. According to Bortnowska, his report from the Holocaust sites written immediately after the war brims with emotionality and exaggeration allegedly innate in Jews, with “repugnance” and “emphasis”. Bortnowska expresses care for Tsanin, she worries about his detachment from a reporter’s impartiality, and in doing so, she delegitimises him. She writes:

I don't know what Tsanin's understandable repugnance did with his life. I fear about him, I sympathise with him because of the poisonous burden he had to carry. [...] Generally speaking, it is difficult to expect "restraint" from him. I suppose that this emphatic note is intensified in statements in Yiddish, the dark history imposes this tint. I use the word "emphasis" instead of the familiar "exaggeration". There is no such thing as "exaggeration" in despair. (Bortnowska, 2020, p. 28)

What Tsanin wrote, what he described – that's sheer intensification, emotionality, and emphasis. What was written in the Biłgoraj yitzkor book is sheer exaggeration. Meanwhile, the ghost and will-o'-the-wisps in the marshes are a testimony to truth. The shrine made of fibreboard is the truth. Fibreboard consists of wood, among other components. The wood was produced from the forest growing on Jewish dead bodies. This fibreboard can be used to make a shrine with a cross and place it where Jews were murdered. This is the limit of the possibility of the Jewish presence in the physical space and in the debate. The Jewish voice cannot do anything more in Poland.

A.Z.: In this sense, fibreboard is a bit like the crosses made of matzevot seen in Łukasz Baksik's photographs (Baksik, 2012).

E.J.: As for the status of the Jewish narrative, if it hadn't been rendered completely harmless, we wouldn't have much to do today. Because Jewish accounts include everything that researchers are discovering today amid scandal. And the procedures that disarm the Jewish story resemble a cascade: if silencing doesn't work, omission will, if omission fails to bring effect, then invalidation is employed through subjectivisation or medicalisation, or traumatising. Here, the Polish narcissus falls into self-complacency about his own magnanimity: they suffer from trauma, poor things, things got mixed up in their confused little heads, let's have mercy, let them talk their nonsense, no problem for us. There's also the game of Chinese whispers. The Jewish voice says: Poles dealt this to Jews. The Polish voice eagerly agrees: Oh yes! People dealt this to people. And if this doesn't help, overt disciplining means are employed: We've hosted you for so many years and that's how you show gratitude! And as the *Tygodnik Powszechny* magazine wrote after the Kielce pogrom: Testify to Polish help for Jews, now! If this doesn't help, one can say that what Jews say are not facts but opinions and accusations against Poles of complicity in the Holocaust as part of Jewish vengeance. Jewish vengeance is an innate attribute of Jews. Jews are born vengeful, so they must take revenge for no reason. It's logical. And if this also falls short, enter Judeo-Communism and the two totalitarianisms that it brought about, because in the face of the Judeo-Bolshevik October Revolution, the collective entity called Hitler had no other choice, as expounded profusely in *Mein Kampf*. However, even if knowledge about Polish antisemitism makes its way through communication channels, it is not embraced in the framework principles of the whole narrative but merely squeezed into the "minority corner". At the opening conference of the POLAND Museum, its then director Professor Dariusz Stola gave the assurance that a chapter about Jews would be or had already been add-

ed to Polish history textbooks, and perhaps even one more about the Holocaust.⁴ This is the essence of the latter strategy: generating an illusion of change, making lots of fuss about it, while diligently taking care that nothing changes.

K.S.: Memorial books were written in Yiddish. Survivors did this for the murdered, within the internal Jewish discourse which stood no chance in the face of the hegemonic, mass-produced story about Polish innocence. Numerous memorial books were compiled by Nachman Blumental (1902–1983). One could write things there that couldn't be said anywhere else. In 1946, Szymon Datner (1902–1989), a survivor from the Białystok ghetto, wrote a lengthy text about the Holocaust of Jews in Jedwabne and the surrounding area for the Jewish Historical Commission of the Voivodeship Jewish Committee in Białystok (Stoll, 2012). Drawing on the accounts of Jewish survivors, he described in detail the scale of the crimes committed by Poles against Jews. He did this in Yiddish. The same text could not be published in Polish. Only one chapter has so far been published in Polish – concerning antisemitic violence in Wąsosz. In the volume (Machcewicz & Persak, 2002) that purportedly contains “all archival documents available today concerning the events in the summer of 1941 in Jedwabne and other towns in the regions of Białystok and Łomża” (Kieres, 2004, p. 9), there was no place for the whole of Datner's text. It was deliberately excluded (Stoll, 2012, p. 387). This is yet another example of Jewish loneliness. First they perished alone, then they talked and wrote about the Holocaust alone. The Jewish voice was and remains a lonely one. If we don't treat Jewish voices seriously and only put them in footnotes, we just reinforce the narrative of camouflage, the narrative of the perpetrators and accomplices.

Here is one more example of the lonely condition of the Jewish voice and testimony. In the summer of 1948, Nachman Blumental, Director of the Jewish Historical Institute, went to Dębica, Wielopole Skrzyńskie and the surrounding area to reconstruct the circumstances of the murder of his wife Maria Blumental (née Tewel) and his son Ariel during the German occupation and the Holocaust. He talked to local residents who were there in June 1943. He noted down their stories regarding what they saw and knew. I came across the author's hand-written notes in Nachman Blumental's archive.⁵ Blumental's findings show that Maria Blumental (b. 1 August 1904) and Ariel Blumental

4 *From Ibrahim ibn Yakub to 6 Anielewicz Street. International Conference to Mark the Opening of the Core Exhibition of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, 11–14 May 2015* – recording of the conference available online through POLIN Museum website: <https://www.polin.pl/en/conference-may-2015>, accessed 10.12.2020.

5 The document forms part of Nachman Blumental's archive, preserved by his son Miron Blumental. The documents were stored for many years in the crawl space in his house in Vancouver. As a member of the research team PREMEC (PREMIers Écrits de la Shoah), headed by Dr Aurélia Kalisky (ZfL, Berlin) and Prof. Judith Lyon-Caen (EHESS, Paris), I visited Vancouver twice in 2019 in order to gain access to and look through Nachman Blumental's archive and to prepare the transport of the materials to the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research in New York. In Vancouver, I received help from Prof. Richard Menkis, Michèle Smolkin, Prof. Sima Godfrey and Anna Switzer. In the summer of 2019 – thanks to Prof. Sima Godfrey – I worked at an office at the Peter Wall Institute. In November and December 2019, Prof. Richard Menkis made an office available to me at the History Department of the UBC. I came across Blumental's notes from 1948 in November 2018. I would like to thank Elżbieta Janicka for deciphering the manuscript, which is partly damaged, and for the first transcript from December 2018.

(b. 16 February 1940) were arrested in June 1943 by two officers of the Blue Police in the village of Mała, taken to the Blue Police station in Wielopole Skrzyńskie, detained and executed the next day – on 7 June 1943 – in the Jewish cemetery in Wielopole Skrzyńskie by a certain German.⁶ The arrest of Maria Blumental and Ariel Blumental by the policemen was preceded by a denunciation which came from the non-Jewish local community – from the nearby village of Brzeziny, from the nearby village of Mała or from Dębica, where Maria Blumental was born. All the places on the so-called Aryan side turned out “unsafe”.⁷ In short, Maria Blumental, who possessed so-called “Aryan papers”, was informed on by her neighbours.

The murders of Maria and Ariel Blumental didn't have to happen. But they turned out to be necessary in the eyes of the “participating observers” (Janicka, 2018a, 2020) and the Blue Police. As far as they were concerned, death was the only possibility. In other words, the majority group played the role of the “second instance” (Elżbieta Janicka), perceiving the situation as if no alternative existed: “An alternativeless scenario [...] produces a reality without an alternative” (Janicka, 2018b). In fact, it was the local residents who condemned the victims to death – because of antisemitic violence and the socio-cultural legitimacy of antisemitism. The Blumentals were simply categorised as members of a stigmatised group, who were murdered, could be murdered and should be murdered. They were associated with the imagined Jew, that is the phantasmatic image of the Jew.

The crime I'm talking about and which I'm going to discuss in a separate academic paper is emblematic in the sense that it sheds light on the socio-cultural frame and landscape of the Holocaust. It took place within the Christian cultural environment, in the space packed with signs of the religion of the dominant, Catholic group. After the night of torture in police detention, where Maria Blumental was “stripped for death”,⁸ the Blue Police officers took Maria and Ariel from the police station through the town to the Jewish cemetery, situated on a hill east of the centre of Wielopole.

The Catholic church can be seen from the cemetery. The distance from the centre of Wielopole to the Jewish cemetery is about 650 metres. “The whole village was crying” while looking at the mother with her child in her arms as they were led to the cemetery. The crying of those who gather to await the death of Jews is tantamount to treat-

6 On 9 August 1948, Director N. Blumental of the Jewish Historical Institute wrote a letter to the public prosecutor's office of the Regional Court in Tarnów with information about the murder. I found a copy of the letter in Nachman Blumental's archive.

7 “Unsafe place” is a term coined by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir: “In the symbolic narrative, pre-modern antisemitism – religious, ethnic and social – designated for them [Jews – K. S.] a real 'unsafe place', which could disappear from the face of the earth at any moment. [...] The pre-modern eye [...] could observe 'unmoved' only how Jews suffered deserved punishment [...], recognising not their life, but their death, as 'part of the eternal God's order on earth'” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2004, p. 66).

8 “Stripping Jews for death” is a phrase coined by Elżbieta Janicka, who introduced it in the context of describing the acts of robbing Jewish escapees from ghettos and transports as well as the “Polish business of help”: “After all, utilising the Polish business of help was conditioned by possession of more than average financial means. A double price list of goods and services was in place. The process taking place at the time can be defined as stripping Jews for death” (Janicka, 2018a, pp. 136–137).



The photograph depicts the site of the Jewish cemetery in Wielopole. Only a handful of the matzevot (gravestones) are left unstolen or not used as objects of “everyday use” (Baksik). The small forest covers part of the cemetery area (Photo by Jos Stübner, 1 July 2020)

ing the living as if they were no longer alive. Maria Blumental was the only one who refused to accept the death sentence passed by everybody at the scene of crime.

In the presence of Nachman Blumental in 1948, the locals presented themselves as though they had nothing to do with his wife and son’s death. Like the “guardians of fate”.⁹ The engagement of the participating observers is manifested in their presenting themselves as helpless individuals who showed sympathy to the victims.

How did Nachman Blumental respond? He made a gesture in the spirit of Walter Benjamin, knowing that “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 255). The people of Wielopole tried to persuade Blumental not to exhume his loved ones. In pursuit of this goal, they made use of philo-Semitic violence (Janicka & Żukowski, 2016). They posthumously accepted Maria into the community from which she had been excluded during her lifetime. However, Blumental didn’t allow himself to be deceived. He requested consent for the exhumation of his wife and son’s remains. On 21 August 1948, the County Office in Dębica granted Blumental permission for the exhumation

9 Bożena Keff uses this metaphor to describe the engagement of Poles in the Holocaust, see: Keff, 2020, p. 7.



The grave of Maria Blumental and Ariel Blumental. Jewish cemetery in Okopowa Street in Warsaw
(Photo by Katrin Stoll, 17 January 2019)



The grave of Maria Blumental and Ariel Blumental. Jewish cemetery in Okopowa Street in Warsaw. The grave of members of the Jewish Fighting Organisation (ŻOB) – who fought, were betrayed and murdered in the Wyszków forest, then exhumed and transported to Okopowa after the war – can be seen in the immediate vicinity
(Photo by Katrin Stoll, 17 January 2019)

and transport of the bodies. He assisted in the exhumation and later accompanied his wife and son on the way from Wielopole to Warsaw. The funeral of Maria Blumental and Ariel Blumental took place on 2 September 1948 in the Jewish cemetery in Okopowa Street in Warsaw.

The obituary by the Central Jewish Committee states that Maria and Ariel Blumental were “murdered by German thugs”. The gravestone has the words “murdered by the Germans” engraved on it. The participation of the Blue Police and participating observers is not mentioned. The “whole truth”, as Mordechai Tsanin put it, is lacking. What does the whole truth consist in? Perhaps in what Calek Perechodnik wrote about in his testimony: “The odd thing is that while we as Jews did not even dream that the order to murder concerned all Jews, the Poles realized right away that not a single Jew would survive the war” (Perechodnik, 2018, p. 245). The pursuit of pacification of Jewish testimonies has to be opposed.

Messy Business

A.Z.: Katrin mentioned the man in the film who says: “that was horrible with those Jews”. Just like Katrin, I initially took it as an expression of empathy. But then I thought of Paweł Łoziński’s film *Birth Place* (Łoziński, 1992). It shows Henryk Grynberg walking from house to house in Radoszyn, where his family stayed in hiding during the war, searching for the graves of his father, brother and the family of his mother, as well as for those who murdered them. Some of the people he talks to wring their hands over the horrible fate of Jews. But in the course of time it turns out that these are the same people who participated in the murders or still participate in covering up the crimes. So, in my understanding, it’s not an expression of empathy, but a kind of mantra. A wail. Letting the public see that “one knows” that such things are unacceptable. Presenting oneself in some way as a moral person, who does not approve of murdering. I may be unfair now because I don’t have a clue about the motivations of this particular man whose statement can be heard in Dominika Macocha’s film. I just want to note that the emphasis placed on horror is not necessarily a sign of empathy.

E.J.: I heard from a man who was lamenting the fate of Jews from the village of Żarnówka: “It was a messy business with the Jews here, you know”. The only detailed information I got from him was: “That Gross, they say he’s lying, but he’s telling the truth”, otherwise he just kept on repeating “messy business” and, each time, he was dumbfounded. That transgression exhausted his possibilities. That whole man was exhausted. I think his tears were sincere. I take that as empathy.

Is it not that empathy for Jews is somehow acceptable, or at least not totally forbidden, as long as it remains harmless? The Polish underground state and the government-in-exile in London kept a close eye on this during that time. It was allowed to sympathise with Jews, or at least to try, as long as it didn’t translate in any way into their fate: as long as it didn’t prevent their deaths during their lifetime, and didn’t lead to doing justice after their deaths. Today, compassion is also allowed if it doesn’t entail

a pursuit of changing the culture and social relations that were the source of the crime. Empathy for Jews is more or less OK in Poland if it remains inconclusive. So not only does it not exclude antisemitism, but on the contrary, it provides an alibi for it. Look what an empathic antisemitism, so gentle and good. “Shake its hand, it’ll do the same. It will not? Oh, that’s a shame”.¹⁰ Inconclusive empathy stays with the empathic person as their attribute. It’s their adornment, if not an adornment of their reference group. It makes the individual and the collectivity feel better. In this way, it blocks change, it even blocks the sheer awareness of the necessity for change, or actually defeats the very possibility that such awareness may appear.

Inconclusive empathy could pose a deadly threat during the Holocaust. Crowds forming around Jews who tried to escape death, both in villages and in cities, always present themselves as full of mercy: “Everybody cried, everybody felt sorry”. By gathering and staying there to wait for the spectacle of killing, the compassionate “everybody” cut off the escape of the victims and made sure the crime took place according to the proper scenario. And other possibilities? “Nothing of the kind would happen”, wrote Zofia Nałkowska in her analysis of one such case (Nałkowska, 2000, p. 26). “Poor Christians”, as Czesław Miłosz called them, saw in a living person a Jew soon to be dead. They mourned someone who was alive, thus making that person dead. In this case, empathy is something more than a screen that veils the participation of “poor Poles” in the crime. It’s an instrument of the crime. Calek Perechodnik reckoned with this kind of empathy by portraying the sensitive Miss Lusja. Perechodnik’s aunt entrusted her belongings to Miss Lusja for safekeeping. Miss Lusja consistently refused to give them back to the aunt, and in this way deprived her of any chances of rescue. Having learnt that her victim had been transported to Treblinka, Miss Lusja burst into “crocodile tears”, as Perechodnik called them; then he concluded: “Just a regular moral whore, but with a mania for pretending a righteous person” (Perechodnik, 2004, p. 121). This is why I’m not at all a fan of the *ex post* mourning of Jews by Poles, let alone *ex ante* mourning.

Returning to the shrine seen in Macocha’s film, the thing is that even if it was meant to become a gesture of empathy for the victims in an outburst of opposition to the crime, it’s all expressed within the Christian framework, which will ultimately absorb all subversion.

K.S.: Perhaps it’s the only sign that won’t be destroyed by anyone and thus has a chance of surviving.

A.Z.: Matzevot with the names of victims installed in places where Jews were murdered are definitely not enough. The matzeva in itself, without information that it marks a site

¹⁰ Lines from a popular children’s poem from Jan Brzechwa’s series *The ZOO*. The poem, which every Polish child knows by heart, is entitled *Niedźwiedź* [The Bear]. It reads: “Ladies and Gentlemen, behold the little bear. The bear is very good today. Shake its hand, it’ll do the same. It will not? Oh, that’s a shame” (“Proszę państwa, oto miś. / Miś jest bardzo grzeczny dziś, / Chętnie państwu łapę poda. / Nie chce podać? A to szkoda”) (Brzechwa, 1973, p. 76).

of a crime, becomes yet another masking sign. A silencing gesture. A matzeva suggests a cemetery. A place of rest. Of burial. Throwing bodies into a ditch is neither a burial nor rest, but a murder. Meanwhile, matzevot allow everybody, including perpetrators, to unproblematically participate in the cemetery ritual. The cemetery thus turns out to be a frame that includes murderers and victims, but excludes the act of naming the crime.

E.J.: Such matzevot – but without the names of victims – are installed by the “Zapomniane” [Forgotten Ones] Foundation, whose mission statement concerns restoring memory, although nobody has forgotten anything in this respect. The Foundation assures us that it doesn’t mean to offend anyone, it offers thanks to – wait for it – “Polish witnesses”, and is pleased if such a matzeva stays on the site for a while. The matzevot are made of wood, just in case. A makeshift thing doesn’t hurt the eyes as much. There’s also a properly circumlocutory inscription: “Here rest Jews murdered during the Holocaust, blessed be their memory. May their souls be entwined in the knot of life”. So it’s an elliptical-periphrastic variation, as in the story of the guide from Dominika Macocha’s film. Sometimes someone nails a piece of paper with a more detailed explanation to a nearby tree. Such things are happening under the auspices of the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries. By the way, the Foundation also has a not bad Forest Gallery on its website.¹¹ This time it’s a gallery of photographs.

K.M.: Jan Tomasz Gross wrote in the introduction to Łukasz Baksik’s album *Matzevot for Everyday Use* that the matzevot stolen and used by Poles as construction material for houses and farms replicated what happened to the bodies of the murdered, and to their story (Gross, 2012). Placing a matzeva on the site of murder is a premature sign. Before placing a matzeva at the site of a murder, one should first go to the matzeva in the cottage wall base or in the privy to find out what really happened.

Production of Incomprehension

E.J.: Returning to the topic of the *artificial – phantasmal – real*, taken up by Xawery, instead of artificiality, I would rather talk about production/construction. The antisemitic phantasm produced the Holocaust. In this sense, although it is false as an imagined vision of reality, it belongs to the sphere of the Real, or at least cannot be radically opposed to it. Everything in the world depicted in *The Mystery of a Forest Lakelet* is constructed, too: the visions of Jews, the three crimes, the statements made about them, the silence around them, and the landscape that veils them. But in terms of commonly understood artificiality, I’m intrigued by the plastic spruce tree branches on the shrine in the middle of the forest. Although it’s probably unintentional, that plastic in some

11 <https://zapomniane.org/> The Foundation also has a Facebook profile with a gallery of photographs.

way is – or can become – a sign of substitution and shift. It can signal that neither is the surrounding nature natural nor is the shrine it decorates really a shrine.

X.S.: When I mentioned artificiality, I didn't mean artificiality in the sense of something unreal, but something that is produced. Jacques Rancière defined the image as a relation that creates a similarity, which is enough to substitute a copy for the original, but also – in the case of the image of art – as a kind of disturbance of this similarity.

The images of art are operations that produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance. Words describe what the eye might see or express what it will never see; they deliberately clarify or obscure an idea. Visible forms yield a meaning to be construed or subtract it. A camera movement anticipates one spectacle and discloses a different one. A pianist attacks a musical phrase “behind” a dark screen. All these relations define images. (Rancière, 2007, p. 7)

This is why I think this forest is artificial, produced, along with the perspective from which we see it, far-removed from the usual perception of the forest. This image is spiced up, promotional, but at the same time it reveals its fabricated character. My attention was caught by the moments when the camera takes off and soars. It first combs the forest from above when we hear the forester's story. He inspects the forest, and we inspect it with him. It's just that the forester questions the legend about the inn and the little church. What inn, what little church? – he says. – There was no high road here, people didn't live here. And we really see that nothing is there.

On the second occasion, the camera shows a central perspective from above of a forest clearing, suggesting that this is the former location of the Donica lakelet. When the statement about murdering Jews is quoted, the camera rises higher and higher. We see the forest from above, and this shows that it was artificially planted, there are distinct borders between the tree species. A quote from the memorial book of Biłgoraj follows. While everything that is spoken has the status of a testimony of local inhabitants, the quotes in the intertitles function as the frame of the story and indicate how we are supposed to understand it. I therefore understand the quotes from the memorial book according to the principle of Rancière's dialectical montage, that is a juxtaposition of two seemingly contradictory elements or disjoining something that appears continuous: emphasising the dichotomy between the produced forest, the produced stories, and the common denominator between them. “It involves organizing a clash, presenting the strangeness of the familiar, in order to reveal a different order of measurement that is only uncovered by the violence of a conflict”, as Rancière wrote (Rancière, 2007, p. 57).

We see a bird's eye view for the third time towards the end of the film. The camera flies over a rivulet and goes back. This happens while the guide's narrative is read out by the artist. The visual discourse is disassembled once again. I'm interested in who is looking here. After all, this is not the perspective of the local inhabitants. For them, the forest has a utilitarian function: the forester works there, someone else grazes cows

there. This is not a historiographic or documentary perspective either. The narrative slips back into the discourse of the witness who says: “that was horrible”. This is where I’d locate the danger involved in the reception of this film. Macocha dissects the dominant story, but fails to offer anything specific to hold on to in the process of interpretation, aside from the so-called “Polish witness of the Holocaust”, who was in fact a participant in the events.

E.J.: I understand the final sequence of *The Mystery of a Forest Lakelet* in terms of Hegelian synthesis. We see the same place once again, the place of the counter-story and the elliptical story, but our awareness is already transformed, and we see a bird’s eye view, associated with a synthetic perspective and a metalevel. As if the artist was saying: this is what you’re really looking at when you see tourist brochures. Here you are, the Forest Gallery. Welcome to Poland.

The narrative of a tourist promotional brochure is perhaps referred to in a similar way at the beginning of the “Powiat biłgorajski” [Biłgoraj County] chapter, penned by Alina Skibińska, in the volume *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland]:

In today’s south-eastern Poland stretches [...] Biłgoraj County, a clearly uplifted area characterised by considerable scenic and natural values. It features vast forest expanses, primarily the Solska Forest and the Janów Forest, along with little forests scattered between the fields situated on the hills and on the plain. It was, and still is, a beautiful, picturesque land with villages and small towns. (Skibińska, 2018, p. 195)

K.S.: It looks pretty from a distance (see Sasnal & Sasnal, 2011).

E.J.: And very much so (Pasikowski, 2012). These decorations became the setting of the activity of the German and Polish administration, and German – albeit multi-cultural – police formations, which are worth enumerating: Sonderdienst, Security Police, Security Services including Kripo and Gestapo, as well as the Protection Police and a garrison of Wehrmacht. Subordinated to the German Gendarmerie was the Polish Police of the General Government and the Ukrainian police. The map of the county provided in the book shows the posts of the German Gendarmerie and the Polish Blue Police.

There are three German gendarmerie posts for the twenty-three communes in the county, and thirteen posts of the Blue Police. Biłgoraj had both a gendarmerie and a Blue Police post. The locations addressed in the film are very close to Biłgoraj. Biłgoraj County was liberated on 24 July 1944. The Jews concerned here were murdered on 20 July 1944. They had probably been hiding at least since the summer or autumn of 1942, that is since one of the liquidation actions. There were always several such actions in bigger towns and usually one in smaller towns. The date of the crime clearly shows that throughout nearly two years that whole apparatus of terror was inactive with regard to the Jews in hiding. It was launched by the decision of the immediate

non-Jewish environment of the Jews. It was on the non-Jewish environment that the killing of Jews in hiding by Germans and so-called Germans depended. One might say that the German apparatus was launched at the local population's own discretion. And this wasn't possible without a social base and cultural legitimacy.

As a result – to quote Alina Skibińska –

In July 1944, no more than several dozen Jews emerged from the Biłgoraj forests. (Skibińska, 2018, p. 356)

[E]scapes to the forest and staying the whole time turned out to be as (in)effective as hiding in villages. (Skibińska, 2018, p. 369)

A decisive majority of people in hiding died in the discussed period at the hands of the German gendarmerie and police. However, this data requires commentary. In the eyes of many witnesses, regardless of the real circumstances, death was inflicted on Jews by Germans. Meanwhile, the death of a vast percentage of the victims resulted from denunciations, being caught and handed in by Poles, being brought to the police station. [...] A surprisingly great number of Jews in hiding were killed directly by Poles, either civilians, the Blue Police or armed groups, which comprised both ordinary bandits who robbed whomever they could and armed troops of various formations of the Polish underground forces. [...] In all towns of Biłgoraj County, extremely brutal methods were used that led to the killing of a great number of Jews on site, in the presence and with the knowledge of their Polish and Ukrainian neighbours. In all locations, uniformed officers and some members of the local civilian population participated first in the liquidation actions, and later in tracing and denouncing escapees. Without their engagement, both in the line of duty and voluntary, the effectiveness of *Judenjagd* would have been much more limited, and the chances of saving Jewish lives correspondingly greater. And, finally, many Poles in all places committed ruthless robberies of Jewish possessions. (Skibińska, 2018, p. 370)

I'm wondering if, in keeping with the old-time paradigm of description, the self-soothing discourse does not render factual knowledge harmless. If we're not dealing with the production of incomprehension that sustains the socio-cultural ritual of surprise.

A.Z.: What do you mean by the old-time paradigm of description?

E.J.: I mean mainly and above all the category of witness (onlooker, bystander) and the view that witnessing is the dominant attitude in the face of the Holocaust, which relegates the essence of the matter to the margins of the events. The dominant group did not act on the margins or fringes of the Holocaust, but along with its culture constituted the framework of the Holocaust. Meanwhile, the so-called witness is still not recognised as a co-creator of and participant in the situation. In the sparing narrative, the active role of the non-Jewish environment begins with the liquidation actions and is delegated to "uniformed officers and some members of the local civilian population". Even the most precise factual knowledge remains powerless if meanings are assigned to it through the application of categories that protect the assumptions and structural framework of the dominant narrative, styled to resemble the narrative of testimony. We can only repeat after Foucault: knowledge is power oriented to preserving the *status quo*. In this case, it is the power of the system of culture and the specific identity regime.

Imposing itself on the categories of description is neo-positivism, according to which even the most precise factual knowledge may be challenged for not being even more precise. Neo-positivist logic has it that only complete induction leads to a legitimate conclusion, and this means examining everything, one hundred percent of cases. This argument is actually very often put forward in Poland with regard to Holocaust studies in order to block the process or the very possibility of drawing conclusions. On the other hand, neo-positivism posits rules of inclusion into the research corpus that block the possibility of getting anywhere near that one hundred percent. A classic double bind. All factual knowledge is always constructed in some way. Dominika Macocha's film offers an insight into the control centre of this process.

The crimes addressed in *The Mystery of a Forest Lakelet* are not mentioned in the chapter of *Night Without End* devoted to Biłgoraj County. The index of geographical names does not feature Edwardów, Wolaniny, the mysterious forest lakelet Donica, or Smólsko. I wrote to Alina Skibińska to ask her if she had come across those murders and if the victims were somehow included in her estimated statistics, because *Night Without End* offers such statistics for each of the analysed counties. I attached a link to Dominika Macocha's film to my e-mail. Here's the response of the scholar, a person of undisputed civil courage, a pioneer in the field:

I've seen this film before, it's really amazing, extraordinary, shocking, it gets under your skin. I've watched it several times and I'll surely do it again. [...]

It also struck me because I've unfortunately found nothing about these crimes in the documents – perhaps something can still be found in the future.

The exhumation protocols from the area of Biłgoraj County haven't been preserved in the Polish Red Cross archive, and I haven't come across them anywhere in other archives either.

Unfortunately, the story with documents is that either they're preserved or not, or else they're stuck and hidden where they're not supposed to be. Sometimes, as you know, one comes across something completely by chance because it's stored in a file with a different inscription on the cover. It's possible that documents about this crime will be found one day, I'm still working on this topic. But at the moment I don't know where the bodies of the exhumed were buried and I don't want to be guessing.

Conclusion: the victims of these crimes are not included in my statistics. All numbers should be treated as lower limits.

I'm aware of the fact that these statistics are not final and they will never be.¹²

It's a mission impossible. In the neo-positivist paradigm, quantitative studies and statistics are king, and empiricism is a guarantee of objectivism. Except that the category of empiricism is formatted in such a way that the victims we're talking about have no chance of meeting its criteria. They are unobjective victims.

K.S.: The Polish Center for Holocaust Research notes that around 10% of Jews were seeking rescue in the area of Biłgoraj County, and no more than 1% survived. If so, what has

12 E-mail from Alina Skibińska, 20 May 2020.

happened to the postulate of a new approach to sources? Twenty years ago, Jan Tomasz Gross appealed to historians to change the approach to the testimonies of survivors:

When considering survivors' testimonies, we would be well advised to change the starting premise in appraisal of their evidentiary contribution from a priori critical to in principle affirmative. By accepting what we read in a particular account as fact until we find persuasive arguments to the contrary, we would avoid more mistakes than we are likely to commit by adopting the opposite approach. (Gross, 2001, pp. 102–103)

What does this block in Polish historiography consist in? Is it the case that it remains in the sphere of establishing the facts?

E.J.: It consists in separating historiography from critical theory. The change of approach to sources postulated by Gross hasn't happened. Neo-positivism still reigns supreme, without reflection on its own premises and stakes as well as the interests that it serves. Carlo Ginzburg published his fundamental text *Just One Witness* in 1992, overturning the *testis unus, testis nullus* principle, previously valid in historiography (cf. Ginzburg, 1992). However, nearly thirty years later, the Jewish memorial book is not a source that could influence the statistics, even if it finds confirmation in word of mouth, because the latter is not such a source either, even if it finds confirmation in the memorial book of Biłgoraj. This is so because the source critique applied to both of them does not take into account the contemporary humanities, even though historians are humanists.

As a result of not rethinking the premises, the picture of the events also lacks the element of such fundamental importance as the Catholic Church, which was omnipresent, all-seeing and all-knowing, also thanks to the institution of confession, and which had a formative authority and access to one hundred percent of non-Jewish, Catholic participants in the events from the cradle to the grave. Other Christian confessions were also present in the less centrally located areas, so the questions should be addressed to them too: to their doctrines, hierarchies and their faithful. But the Roman Catholic Church was and still is the dominant Church in Poland. Dominant and triumphant. By the way, it seems like a Freudian slip that in the acceptable version of the story recorded in Dominika Macocha's film, the mystery of the forest lakelet consists in an invisible little church that vanished in darkness and depths. Church towers are landmarks of the Holocaust landscape, but the Church remains invisible in the historiography of the Holocaust. This state of affairs is rationalised by stating that the church archives are inaccessible, as if this alone was not information that's at least extensive, if not exhaustive, or in any case information that warrants absolutely categorical conclusions. Especially that the sacred texts of Christianity are at our disposal, and so is the Church's output concerning Jews throughout the centuries, abundantly documented not only with regard to the interwar period. We also know what the situation was with the Church after the war. So it's not that we're facing a complete mystery. We know enough to pose questions, formulate hypotheses and account for them in the proposed model of the situation.

Ginzburg is a guru of microhistory, meaning exactly such history at the level of the county which offers grounds to make statements about entire cultures and societies. It appears as if microhistory in Poland jibbed at connecting the dots in the picture.

K.M.: This is why Xawery is right that the worst thing that can happen is for Dominika Macocha's project to be treated as a Polish testimony to the tragedy of Jews, and the resultant thwarting of its potential. Unfortunately, it runs such a risk because the means of defence installed in it may turn out to be too weak.

Edited by Anna Zawadzka

Translated by Łukasz Mojsak

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Robota robiona była. O instalacji wideo-rzeźbiarskiej 50°31'29.7"N 22°46'39.1"E, 50°30'56.2"N 22°46'01.0"E, 50°30'41.0"N 22°45'49.5"E Dominiki Macochy rozmawiają Elżbieta Janicka, Konrad Matyjaszek, Xawery Stańczyk, Katrin Stoll i Anna Zawadzka

Abstrakt: Niniejszy tekst stanowi zapis dyskusji poświęconej instalacji wideo-rzeźbiarskiej Dominiki Macochy pt. 50°31'29.7"N 22°46'39.1"E 50°30'56.2"N 22°46'01.0"E 50°30'41.0"N 22°45'49.5"E. Dzieło artystki dotyczy dyskursywnych i krajobrazowych mechanizmów kamuflowania zbrodni na Żydach popełnionych przez Polaków podczas Zagłady. Macocha obnaża i dekonstruuje te mechanizmy – przede wszystkim mechanizm fetyszyzmu narracyjnego i mechanizm produkcji sztucznego krajobrazu – na przykładach zaczerpniętych z powiatu biłgorajskiego. Podczas dyskusji, z inspiracji pracą artystki, krytycznemu namysłowi poddane zostają następujące, dominujące współcześnie kategorie opisu Zagłady: 1. zaproponowana przez Martina Pollacka kategoria skażonych krajobrazów, wyrosła na gruncie ideologii dwóch totalitaryzmów; 2. kategoria świadka, maskująca udział obserwatorów w scenariuszach zbrodni; 3. kategoria tabu, ambiwalentna, jeśli wziąć pod uwagę powszechność wiedzy lokalnych społeczności o tym, co stało się z Żydami z ich miejscowości. Refleksja nad produkcją tabu prowadzi dyskutantów do namysłu nad statusem źródeł żydowskich w polu badań nad Zagładą. W źródłach tych bowiem, kompletowanych już od lat czterdziestych, znajdujemy wiele szczegółowych informacji o polskich zbrodniach na Żydach. Nie są one jednak rozpoznane jako źródła przez polskich historyków. Dyskusję kończy próba podsumowania współczesnej kondycji polskiej historiografii w świetle postulatów nowego podejścia do źródeł.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Dominika Macocha; antysemityzm; tabu; świadek; skażone krajobrazy; Martin Pollack; Zagłada Żydów; fetyszyzm narracyjny



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