

Testimoniality: A lexicon of witnesses of Holocaust non-sites of memory in Poland

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Abstract

The authors analyse grassroots modalities of the figure of witness in the communities living in the vicinity of uncommemorated sites of past violence. Testimoniality, understood as the disposition to bear witness, i.e. both the willingness to testify and the ability to provide important information, is discussed in relation to complex, heterogenic and dynamic assemblages that form around the sites in question, comprising both human (neighbours, wardens) and non-human actors (the landscape and biotope, material objects), diverse practices, performative gestures, and relations. The analysis is placed in the context of the debate on the complicated status of the “witness” as a category in the Polish post-war culture of memory, as well as of new relevant categories emerging in both Polish and international scholarship on the Holocaust. The authors conceptually systematise testimonial situations and propose a lexicon of testimonial positions, practices and objects that are grounded in the material gathered in fieldwork during the research project on unmemorialised sites of genocide in Poland. They distinguish: the crown witness, the trustee, the volunteer, the official and the contingent witness, and discuss categories of testimonial gesture, testimonial performance, testimonial object, and testimonial words.

Key Words

genocide, gesture, Holocaust, Polish memory culture, witness

Introduction

In Polish (like in German and unlike in English), the repertoire of terms for giving evidence, for the confirmation or reporting of events faithfully, enjoys a shared etymology: *świadek*, *świadectwo*, *świadczyć* (respectively in English: *witness*, *testimonial* [also an adjective in English]/*evidence/testimony/certificate*, *testify/bear witness*), standing for a subject, object and activity. Although contemporary Polish does not offer corresponding adjectival or adverbial cognates in common use, the latter nevertheless exist, at least in all major dictionaries. Samuel Bogumił Linde, regarded as first lexicographer of the Polish language, lists (1807–1814) the adjective *świadczeni* (lit. having the character of testimony) as in “bearing witness, serving testimony” but also “confirmed by testimonials”, as well as the adverb *świadczeni* (lit. “in a testimonial manner”, “in the presence of witnesses”). And it is precisely *testimoniality*, *świadczeni* – the disposition to

bear witness and to be a witness – that we would like to discuss in the context of unmemorialised sites of violence, so common in Polish and Eastern European landscape, related to the Holocaust, Romani genocide and ethnic conflicts during World War II. Roma Sendyka (2015, 2016) dubbed these abandoned post-violence localisations “non-sites of memory”, expanding the term used by Claude Lanzmann in the context of post-camp and post-ghetto sites. As Sendyka argues, the category of “non-site of memory” proves to be especially useful in case of localisations that witnessed dispersed violence in Eastern-Central Europe, such as “Holocaust by bullets” and third phase of the Holocaust. “Holocaust by bullets” (Desbois 2008) designates numerous killings by shooting in occupied Poland, the Soviet Union and Southeast Europe perpetrated by mobile squads (*Einsatzgruppen*), but also other German forces, including police battalions (Browning 1992). The third phase of the Holocaust, after ghettoisation and extermination in camps, called

by Germans *Judenjagd*, the hunt for the Jews, refers to fates of those Jewish refugees who managed to escape ghettos and went into hiding (Engelking 2011). During that time, their future depended mostly on the help or betrayal of non-Jewish populations: after the first weeks when German forces actively sought the escapees from the liquidated ghettos (with the help of – in the case of General Government – Polish “blue” police and the construction service *Baudienst*), later they mostly reacted to denunciations of local non-Jewish residents (Grabowski 2013). As historians estimate, out of 200–300 thousand Jews looking for help, only about ten percent survived (Engelking and Grabowski 2018). In both cases, the “Holocaust by bullets” and the third phase of the Holocaust, the killings were done by shooting, carried out in ravines, forests and fields outside the settlements or within towns and villages, often with the participation of Polish police and with the assistance of local residents, who usually dug graves and buried the bodies. These sites, omnipresent in Polish landscape, often lack any form of official commemoration or are abandoned and overgrown, have not been consecrated by religious rituals, very often still contain human remains, and, most importantly, generate a vast array of reactions of local communities: from devastation and littering, through processes of non-remembering and negligence, to vernacular, weak, unofficial forms of memorialisation. In this paper, we intend to analyse how localisations of such characteristics create testimonial situations, engaging agents and practices of various ontological status.

Thus, we would like to consider *testimoniality* in relation to complex, heterogenic and dynamic assemblages that form around non-sites of memory, comprising both human and non-human actors (the landscape and biotope, material objects), diverse practices, performative gestures, and relations. We assume that *testimoniality* is a *disposition to bear witness*: understood as both the willingness to testify and the ability to provide important information. We do not attribute to the agents, objects or practices that interest us the feature of testimoniality (or being a witness) “a priori”, as if it were an essential quality. Instead, we observe how testimoniality is generated through specific situations in a dispersed manner. This article is an attempt to conceptually systematise those situations.

By analysing various testimonial agents (or rather positionalities) and practices related to the uncommemorated sites of genocide, we also draw attention to the complicated status of the “witness” as a category in the Polish post-war culture of memory. In the discussions on the role of Poles in the events relating to the Holocaust, the term “witness” was challenged as inaccurate to express various form of implication and often the complicity of Polish citizens during the Holocaust. These discussions have been ongoing since the end of the 1980s and were incited by the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann (1985), who portrayed Poles mostly as – perhaps passive, but certainly cruel – observers of the death of Jews – a depiction that sparked

heated debate in Poland (Kwieciński 2012; Forecki 2013; Głowacka 2020). An important voice was then articulated by a Polish intellectual and literary scholar Jan Błoński in the essay *Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto* (1987 [1988]) who pointed out Polish indifference towards their Jewish compatriots during the war. More recently, the critical engagement with the notion goes hand in hand with criticism directed towards the term *bystander*, taken from Raul Hilberg’s (1992) categorisation of the roles in the Holocaust (victim – perpetrator – bystander). The use of the category of “Holocaust bystander” in relation to non-Jewish witnesses, usually neighbours and co-citizens of the victims, has been polemically scrutinised at least in two aspects. Firstly, the notion of a bystander as a passive, non-involved and disengaged observer of the events does not represent historical reality and overlooks the complexity of social relations of the communities as well as interchangeability of the roles assumed by non-Jewish individuals under the Nazi occupation. Especially the research on micro-historical perspective level (Bartov 2011; Wiercholska 2016) has proved inefficiency of such static categories: positionalities under long-lasting violence were dynamic, fluid and blurred. Secondly, it has been criticised as downplaying the complicity of the local communities in the events. Referring to the behaviour of ethnic Poles during the Nazi occupation, Jan T. Gross expressed it in the poignant phrase: “In the face of the Holocaust, ‘doing-nothing’ is also an action” (2014: 886). This context became especially urgent since the publication of Gross’s *Neighbors* (2000 [2001]) about the murder of Jews in Jedwabne committed by their Polish neighbours in 1941. In both Polish and international scholarship, new categories emerge, which emphasised various forms of implication, complicity and economic profit from the genocide shared by its seemingly not engaged observers. Therefore, notions such as “facilitator”, “beneficiary” (Fulbrook 2012, 2019), “participating observer” (Janicka 2015), “onlooker/viewer” (Sendyka 2019a, 2019b; Niziołek 2019), “implicated subject” (Rothberg 2020) have come to be used. The genealogy of the revision of the phrase “Polish witness to the Holocaust” can be found, partially, in the rooting of the discussion in a western paradigm of witness as a *survivor*, and, thus, someone in possession of particular “moral clarity”, as Carolyn J. Dean aptly puts it (2017: 631). Eichmann’s trial in 1961, when Holocaust survivors had their voices heard for the first time, “transformed the victim’s powerlessness into a newly discovered source of inner strength: of honour, of glory, and of wisdom” (Dean 2017: 631). The survivor turned to be the paradigmatic witness and an attribution of being a witness became imbued with morality, exceeding the meaning and authority of earlier, mostly legal, contexts. Lanzmann’s film records this process, representing the third of Hilberg’s triad, the “bystanders”, exclusively as (mere) eye-witnesses – those that watch and register what is happening, liable for the collective responsibility of the passive masses. Eyewitnesses to the Holocaust in this view cannot be real witnesses: Lanzmann made an axiom out of the distinction

between those who experienced the event and can therefore *bear witness* and those who observed and can only *give a testimony*.

Our attempt to investigate testimoniality as an element of the Polish culture of memory begins with the local specificity of the figure of the witness: its equivocal ethical, epistemological, political and societal status. Thus, the Holocaust, especially in the case of smaller towns and villages, unfolded in total visibility and became a strangely intimate (Bartov 2018) everyday occurrence, making everybody complicit in the events. Moreover, the long-term violence of German occupation and disruption of social relations caused by it permanently shaped the affective structure of Polish society that has not been dealt with on communal and individual level until today. While agreeing with findings of the aforementioned discussions on various forms of implication of Polish society in the Holocaust, we also would like to consider Polish eyewitnesses as form of “material witnesses” (Schuppli 2020): not only *witnesses to* but also *evidence of* complex historic experience as well as worldview, *Mitwelt*, economy of power performed by its various participants. Therefore, it seems crucial to recognise the ways the non-Jewish witnesses have related to the Holocaust in its aftermath, how they transmitted their knowledge and how the attitude towards the past positions individuals within a post-genocidal community. We aim at – in case of human actors – analysing forms of testimonial positions undertaken now, therefore limited in Polish context to those who were not victims of the Holocaust and their descendants. We recognise that the label of *witness* is applied in this essay almost exclusively to the members of the majority culture who bear witness to the experience of those who were violently deprived of the very chance to take up a position of witness. Aware of these ramifications for the dynamics of power that testimoniality may preserve, we primarily intend to observe and exercise broad potential uses of the categories witness-testimony-testimonial in the context of contemporary forms of remembrance related to the Holocaust and Romani genocide in Poland. Rendering testimoniality primarily as a *disposition to bear witness*, we ask: how do people in contemporary Poland position themselves as witnesses to genocide, but also how do they react to an external call to give a testimony? Or, in what ways may we consider them witnesses? How is it influenced by the dominant narratives of contemporary Polish collective memory culture and memory politics? Finally, although our goal is not to cast moral judgment and make testimoniality conditional on the questions of ethical position in the present or the past, we believe that the analysis of the contemporary forms of witnessing

may bring valuable insights about modes of complicity and involvement of Polish society in the Holocaust.

We propose therefore a lexicon of testimonial positions, practices, objects, and words that are grounded in the material gathered in fieldwork during the research project on unmemorialised sites of genocide in Poland.¹ We wish, therefore, above all, to consider the grassroots modalities of the figure of witness in the communities living in the vicinity of uncommemorated killing sites and to analyse the positionalities assumed in an effort to bear witness to the past, even by those who do not have an indexical link to that past, that is, did not participate in the historical events. Each analysed positionality might not exhaustively describe all the features of any individual witness’s actions and, in reality, several types of testimonial engagement we describe may overlap in any given situation. Consequently, the proposed typology is not intended as a standardised chart of fixed categories, but rather as a flexible network of partially interchangeable models, whose coordination may help recalibrate our thinking about witnessing, and particular acts of testimonial engagement. Some of the positionalities discussed seem particularly likely to overlap or coincide. As a result of the assumptions we have made, we have relaxed criteria usually used to distinguish between survivor-witnesses and “bystanders”, eyewitnesses from secondary witnesses etc.

The crown witness

When describing the relationships between the sites of former violence and the people who remember them, our interlocutor and guide to the killing sites in Radechnica (in the Lubelskie Voivodship),² Marianna Zybala, suddenly used a very particular formulation. Speaking about her husband, the by then late Stanisław Zybala, a historian and regionalist and indefatigable warden of Jewish memory in Radechnica, she called him the “crown witness” (using Polish phrase *świadek koronny* standing for “protected witness” in English, or the one who has “turned Queen’s evidence”).

Stanisław Zybala had spent the war in Radechnica as a boy and was an eyewitness to the Holocaust. The Germans entered Radechnica in mid-September 1939. The first cases of anti-Semitic violence, probably with the involvement of Polish villagers, happened there no later than in October 1939. The first public execution of Jewish inhabitants of the village took place in July 1942, while in September 1942, all Jews who remained alive up to this point were deported to the ghetto in nearby Szczebrzeszyn. Many of them managed to escape the transport and went into hiding, mostly in the forests that surrounded the village. From autumn 1942 well into

¹ *Uncommemorated Genocide Sites and Their Impact on Collective Memory, Cultural Identity, Ethical Attitudes and Intercultural Relations in Contemporary Poland* (2016–2020), see acknowledgements.

² Radechnica is a small village in Roztocze (a region in eastern Poland), in Zamość County, with approximately 920 inhabitants. The site was researched within the abovementioned project by Maria Kobielska, Roma Sendyka, Aleksandra Szczepan with the support of Aleksandra Janus, Jacek Małczyński, Karina Jarzyńska, Tomasz Majkowski and Katarzyna Suszkiewicz.

1943, they were continuously being caught and executed, often in public, by German Schutzpolizei; some of the executions were carried out by members of the Polish “blue” police. The victims’ bodies were buried at multiple sites (Skibińska 2018: 191–382). Furthermore, Radeznica witnessed many other forms of war violence directed towards its non-Jewish inhabitants, including deportations, arrests, attacks, bombings, and was a stage of partisan activity.³

Stanisław Zybała became a vernacular historian of these events, preoccupied predominantly by the village’s wartime past. He wrote the following about his own experience of an eyewitness: “That scene left in me a kind of photographic plate that remains inside me till today” (2001: 7).⁴ It is worth pausing a moment to consider the distinction between an eyewitness and a crown witness: as is clear from Zybała’s recollections, being an eyewitness, a kind of “photographic plate” recording the Holocaust, was not all that unique: the death of the Jewish inhabitants happened before the eyes of the entire village. Zybała’s regal status as the “crown witness” is to be found rather in the shift from mere minute taker to active guardian of the memory of these events, which are not anchored in any collective practices or memorials. He collected information about the unmarked execution and burial sites and managed to document and map at least eight of the latter, located as well in close proximity of the village’s buildings as in nearby forests and meadows. Almost all of them (except one site commemorated by the only Radeznica survivor, Rubin Weistuch) were left abandoned and routinely ignored by residents, who did not feel responsible for this heritage, placing Zybała in the position of the sole guardian of memory. At the same time, working as a librarian, he became the village’s history chronicler and archivist. As such, he won the respect of the local community, but simultaneously was perceived, with his unusual interests and strong opinions he voiced, as something of an eccentric. Thanks to this image, he could enjoy certain privileges to raise the topic of the local difficult past, understood here in terms of collective remembering. Firstly, “difficult past” relates to the past experiences that do not fit into the mainstream framework of national memory, organised by the principle of maintaining a positive self-portrait of the group via focusing mainly on Polish martyrdom and the history of fight and resistance. Secondly, it may be subjected to masking or erasing in order to reduce the risk for the community (be it national or local) to be held responsible for the past violence (or other harm) exerted by its members. As a result, in the absence of convenient cognitive schemes and of communal will to remember, this mnemonic content turns out difficult to narrate and acknowledge, let alone commemorate.

Let us consider the peculiar phrase used by Stanisław’s wife, Marianna Zybała in a broader context than her own intentions suggest. An adjective “crown”, in Polish especially, denotes the quality of being decisive or the most important, as well as “uncommon”, great, masterful (however, the dictionary examples in the latter cases are rather ironic, e.g. *koronny oszust, złodziej*, lit: “royal swindler, thief” – similar to the English “a right royal (e.g.) mess”). In combining the adjectival form of “crown” with witness, Marianna Zybała emphasises the gravity and directness of the evidence given. The existence of one such “crown witness” is the *sine qua non* for the preservation of a difficult past.

The crown witness is, therefore, the main witness, the most important, the “arch-witness”. Moreover, it is not the fact of being an eyewitness that makes someone the “crown witness”. The “crown witness” wants to bear witness and looks for ways to be as good a witness as possible. Their testimony can in this way be effective, invested with the power to reactivate difficult memory. The “royalty” of the witness is, however, ambiguous. According to the contemporary usage of the word, a “crown witness” – the accused who turns Queen’s evidence – is one who testifies against the interests of their own group, as group that is guilty, and at the same time, as exposed to a risk of revenge, needs protection. The characterisation implicit in the phrase may thus be applied to a non-Jewish Polish person who decided to speak out about Jewish suffering, taking into account the element of complicity of the Polish community in the fate of the deceased. Perhaps here lies the painful paradox of outcast witnesses in “bystander” communities: a betrayal of one’s own community and guilt are included from the outset.

The trustee

The situations we are considering show that – contrary to the classical concept of testimony based on the personal experience of the witness – testimony is a transferable disposition. Marianna Zybała, quoted above, has been for us a clear instance of this possibility. She moved to Radeznica in the 1950s and had no first-hand knowledge of the wartime history of the place. However, she went on to spend the rest of her life there, and she was her husband’s companion and co-participant in the testimonial actions he initiated as a “crown witness”. In 2013, representatives of The Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland – a body established alongside the Jewish Community of Warsaw to supervise Jewish cemeteries in Poland and to identify unmarked grave sites of the Holocaust – came to Radeznica, alerted by a letter sent by Stanisław

3 A strong underground movement was connected with the local Bernardine abbey where local partisans often took shelter. After the war a mental hospital was opened in the buildings constructed next to the abbey. In the last decade, the church in the abbey has become a mausoleum for the so-called cursed soldiers of the right-wing anticommunist underground formations (the exhumed bodies found in the area by archeological missions of the National Remembrance Institute are in the process of being moved here).

4 Zybała refers here to burying bodies of the victims of one of the executions; he saw himself also several acts of shooting.

Zybała, who intended to draw their attention to the local unmemorialised Holocaust burial sites. At that time, Stanisław’s health no longer permitted him to show the representatives of the Commission around. It was Marianna Zybała who took them on the testimonial walk, undertaking and repeating the testimony she had adopted from her husband. This double act of witnessing: Stanisław Zybała’s oral testimony performed at their house and Marianna Zybała’s guided tour at the sites, was recorded by the Zapomniane [Forgotten] Foundation, collaborating with the Commission (Historie mówione. Radecznicza 2014).

After Stanisław Zybała’s death, his role in the local culture of memory was taken on by his wife: she continues the activity of bearing witness, she leads cultural initiatives, animates, and speaks up for the lost memory, takes responsibility, evaluates. The fact that she had not been an eyewitness to specific wartime events is, it seems today, of lesser significance. Her role is also acknowledged by her community, including recognition in official events: since the death of Stanisław Zybała, she has been perceived as the main expert on local history. It was her, for example, who recounted stories about victims in the course of a memorial event for one of the sites, in which we participated in September 2016, when a modest monument commemorating ten victims buried in a wooded gully was unveiled, due to the efforts of the representatives of the Rabbinical Commission. She was also our guide to the numerous non-sites of memory in Radecznicza.

Adopting a testimonial disposition is not simply a matter of inheriting it. It demands a kind of decision and action, effort undertaken by a “substitute” witness. We propose to call the practice by which this transfer takes place a *trusteeship*. The witness-trustee is someone more than an heir or inheritor. The phrase has a few key connotations related to the situation of testimoniality: the trust which is invested in the trustee by the “crown witness”; the passing on of rare knowledge, care for non-sites of memory. Entrusted testimony does not become property that can be disposed of at will, but is rather a deposit that requires care. Effort-founded trusteeship does not require familial links; Regina Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, Stanisław Zybała’s pupil and co-worker, one generation younger, may be considered his trustee as well. Amateur poet, photographer and local historian herself, Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz co-authored many of Zybała’s works on local history and constantly returns to his testimonial heritage in her own work, re-examining in particular regional war history, the Holocaust, its difficult legacy and non-memory. Her testimonial activity, inspired by collaboration with Zybała, can be reframed in terms of public history and regional identity.

The volunteer

Standing to an extent in contrast with trusteeship – with its strict and manifold obligations placed on successive trustees – we may define another manner of taking on the testimonial function where the “accession” seems more

accidental. This positionality is not connected by the person’s own experience to the site, passed on and accepted by a trusteeship or by direct membership of the local community. What allows us to distinguish the *volunteer* testimonial positionality among numerous local memory activists in Poland (especially those who work in the field of preserving Jewish heritage and commemorating genocide victims) is the particular intensity of their engagement and its affective power. Testimonial actions may serve as founding principles of their self-images and self-definitions. Consequently, volunteers often take an uncompromising stand against non-memory, speaking on behalf of the victims and fiercely protesting mnemonic *status quo*. Again, this is not a first-hand experience of an eyewitness, but rather speaking against the dominant narrative when it masks a difficult past, doing justice to historical truth, acknowledging accountability, and renewing attempts at transforming the community’s complacency into conscience – that lie at the core of testimonial activities.

The function of *volunteer* is often performed, it would seem, by people working at a trans-local level, occupying the role of “engaged experts” in the area of memory, attempting to reveal the past and present character of the non-sites of memory in the countrywide public sphere. Marcin Kački, a reporter, and Mirosław Tryczyk, a researcher and author, both of whom wrote about the past of Podlasie region (Kački 2015; Tryczyk 2020), stand as recent examples of such practices. Tryczyk’s “testimonial zeal” is significant here; he discloses multiple cases of Polish complicity in the genocide and does not hesitate to confront the perpetrators or their descendants, urging them to confession or remorse. His activity is framed, as he reveals in his recent book (2020), by his family violent history, as he belatedly discovers that his late grandfather might have been involved in the murder of his Jewish neighbours or at least benefitted from it. Kački, at times Tryczyk’s collaborator, places himself and his work more in the context of professional journalism, but at the same time demonstrates his engagement and emotional commitment to uncovering the difficult past.

Yet there are also local cases fitting this definition: we can include here Lucjan Kołodziejcki from Borzęcin and Paweł Domański from Żabno (Lesser Poland Voivodship) – local historians. Each has devoted considerable effort into uncovering the fates of local Jewish and Romani minorities: Domański created a Hall of Memory, where he gathered photographs, documents and objects related to the local history, with a significant presence of the history of Żabno Jews, in 1939 constituting almost half of the town’s population. He also participated in the restoration of the Jewish cemetery and erecting a memorial there, and authored a monograph dedicated to the Jews of Żabno *Israelici w Żabnie* [Israelites in Żabno] (Domański 2003), based on detailed archival research. Kołodziejcki, on the other hand, was an enthusiastic investigator of the history of the village of Borzęcin and its surroundings, and also made some gestures against the predominantly conciliatory local culture of memory: he catalogued

formerly Jewish houses and investigated the details of the burning of the synagogue, destroyed after the war by locals (Kołodziejcki n.d.). In 2018, he initiated a monument comprising 22 plaques dedicated to all victims of 20th century conflicts from Borzęcin and neighbouring Bielcza,⁵ among them the names of 44 victims of the Holocaust and family names of almost 60 Romani victims of two executions in the villages. The volunteer's testimonial activity is often driven by a sense of a historical mission but also by pure vocation, a hobby of an explorer of the forgotten local history. He or she investigates both a glorious and difficult past and constantly negotiates what can and cannot be made visible with their community.

The outcast

A tension often mounts between practices commemorating sites of genocide, and those who undertake those practices, and the existing rules of the culture of memory. This is most evident when questions arise of the joint responsibility or the guilt of the contemporary local – and, more generally, Polish – population: for participating in the events or taking economic advantage of the destruction of part of the community by its ethnically Polish members.

In Szczurowa, a village in the Lesser Poland Voivodship, the massacre of 93 Romanies by the German gendarmerie in 1943 is commemorated each year by the Romani Caravan of Memory – a memorial initiative organised since 1996 by Romani and Polish organisations from the nearby city Tarnów (Bartosz 2015: 18–23). Before the war, Szczurowa also had a significant Jewish population that grew during the war to almost 400 people. In 1942, all of them were sent to the Brzesko ghetto, and they were taken there by the Polish inhabitants of the village, who were following German orders. Yet, Jewish citizens of Szczurowa have not been commemorated in any way until today. During fieldwork for the project, we met a witness in the village who spoke at length about the fate of the Romani community and yet was highly reserved when it came to questions about the Jews of Szczurowa. At one point, however, she herself took up the topic, saying, “There were some people who had Jewish property, that ... What they say now, that Polish people were on at the Jews, because there were various...” and after a moment she finished, “Various things happened, but I’m not saying anything” (Interview with A.B. 2017). The witness is on the side of her own community, she does not testify against it, yet in the form of the broken allusions she emphasises, in fact, the key issue: the memory of complicity

removes from official collective practice the commemoration of those whose death brought some or other benefit to the local community.

As a result, the witness undertaking this kind of action may ultimately be, and often is, considered an outcast member of the community – *Nestbeschmutzer*, literally “sullyng their own nest”, being harshly disciplined by their own compatriots up to the point of ostracism. The parameter of being “outcast” seems however to come in degrees: the practice of many witnesses is based in this context on a particular, multifaceted caution (even if they are unaware of it). They balance on the edge of whether the community is willing and able to accept a degree of “testimonial risk”. And this risk may be indeed significant, as the examples of Ireneusz Ślipek and Zbigniew Romaniuk, memory activists engaged in the commemoration of Jewish victims, respectively in Warta and Brańsk, show – they both exist on the margins of their communities. Or, it may bring even more severe outcomes, as in the case of Leon and Leszek Dziedzic from Jedwabne, father and son, an eyewitness and his “trustee”, who decided to move out from the village and move to the US due to the growing hostility and acts of aggression committed against them (Bikont 2016). Finally, the risk of being an outcast often influences the degree to which a witness would be willing to share his or her memories about the difficult past, and the general political climate, such as caused by passing the “Holocaust bill” by the Polish parliament in 2018, may significantly reinforce this tendency.

The official

The function of the witness can be undertaken in the form of a public task. A witness may be called on to perform this task by their own sense of obligation and competence or legitimised by various institutional networks. In our view, Adam Bartosz can be considered an official witness. He is the organiser of local initiative the Romani Caravan of Memory that commemorates sites of Romani genocide in Lesser Poland: every year, Romani and non-Romani participants travel from Tarnów to four locations of the killings: Żabno, Borzęcin, Bielcza and Szczurowa (Bartosz 2015). Bartosz is not only the creator and host of the Caravan, and the master of ceremony conducting the celebrations at each of the visited locations of the Romani genocide. Every year, he also tells the history of each site and creates communal structures on which he transfers a testimonial disposition: now all the participants know

5 Bielcza is a village in Brzesko county in the Małopolska (Lesser Poland) Voivodship, with approximately 1,600 inhabitants. From the mid-19th century Bielcza has been frequented by Romani groups, with a few Romani families settling and living there before World War II. In July 1942, at least 28 Romanies were murdered by German gendarmerie and Polish collaborating forces, the so-called Polish “blue” police. Aleksandra Szczepan, Łukasz Posłuszny and Kinga Siewior worked on this case with the support of Roma Sendyka and Jacek Małczyński. Borzęcin is a village in Brzesko county in the Małopolska (Lesser Poland) Voivodship, with approx. 3,700 inhabitants. A few Romani families settled and lived there prior to World War II, and 143 inhabitants lost their lives in the conflict, including 43 Jews. In July 1942 at least 29 Romanies were murdered in Borzęcin. Aleksandra Szczepan, Łukasz Posłuszny and Kinga Siewior worked on this case. Nearby Żabno today has 4,200 inhabitants.

what happened and where. “The place where we are now” (Tabor Pamięci 2012), “We have come here once again” (Recording of Romani Caravan of Memory 2017) – in these opening sentences, both the deictic roots of the act of witnessing (“here”) and the immediate invocation of the collective subject “we” are significant, *we* are about to become both the recipients and the participants of the testimony. Bartosz may be considered an official witness, summoned to perform his duties, because he efficiently navigates and negotiates between various milieus: Romani and non-Romani, local and regional, formal and informal, but also holds symbolic capital (he is also a museum curator and creator of the first Polish permanent exhibition dedicated to the Roma in the Tarnów Ethnographical Museum, as well as a pioneer of commemorating the Jewish community in Tarnów) that allows him to contextualise his actions and include them in local politics.

There is one more figure associated with the Caravan to whom can be attributed the function of an official witness, yet of an entirely different character. Krystyna Gil (1938–2021), one of the few survivors of the mass executions of Roma in Szczurowa, appeared every year during the celebrations as a “guarantor” of the past. The calling of Krystyna Gil was obviously of particular significance – she was a survivor not a bystander – and it was also important that she had become a witness-icon of the Romani genocide. The legitimization of her testimonial presence was grounded by both the indexical nature of her status as a survivor and the symbolic capital she represented, especially since her position had been formed within the discourse of Jewish Holocaust remembrance – her testimony, for instance, was recorded by the biggest Holocaust-related institutions.

The official witness participates in many symbolic orders and their position is guaranteed by recognition on supra-local level. Therefore, the engagement of such people as Jonathan Webber, a university professor who restored the Jewish cemetery in Brzostek (Subcarpathian Voivodship in south-eastern Poland) or the Olympic athlete Dariusz Popiela who dedicated himself to commemorating Jewish killing sites near Krościenko (Lesser Poland) proved to be successful: their position engages local communities and authorities and secures financial support.

The contingent

The previous functions are founded on a variety of structures of undertaking, adopting, usurping or forgoing the testimonial disposition. We may also invoke, however, the basic circumstance of something “calling for” testimony i.e. the situation of being a witness by the very fact of finding yourself in a place where something happens. This fact is accidental, contingent. The key aspect here is the peculiar passivity of the “recipients” of events, like those who act as – to use the phrase cited above – “photographic plates”, on which the event is imprinted. Eye- and earwitnesses come across an event which may – but need

not – become the subject of their testimonial activity. This process of unwitting registration captures the testimony of Zofia Kilian from Bielcza, who heard an execution in the forest near Borzęcin: in July 1942, German gendarmes, with the help of the Polish “blue” police, shot 29 Romani men, women and children there (Bartosz 2015: 16–17). The witness recalled: “I heard; shrieks, screams, crying, sobbing, ‘youyk’, literally that kind of wailing. I’m telling you; you couldn’t take it. I didn’t understand their words” (Kołodziejewski 2008: 32). The imprint of the past is the material that is difficult to work through; it is incomprehensible, surviving in the form of images, sounds, affects, bodily memory; as a perceptual “deposit” – but one that does not lead to any action from its holder. It is precisely the testimonial situation of interpellation that confers a new positionality of a witness upon a contingent witness, a sensor witness, even though they do not perceive themselves as bearers of a testimony.

The testimonial gesture

The fundamental morpheme of testimonial gesticulation is indicating “It happened here.” Roman Jakobson (1971) called such demonstrative signs that have no meaning in themselves but only by referring to something else – “shifters”. Giorgio Agamben writes in a similar vein about a gesture: “The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality” (2008: 58). At the same time, the ontological status of the non-site of memory is precisely dependent on such non-signifying signs, the deictic/demonstrative gestures. How else – since the killing sites are usually bits of forest floor or bits of fields – could one be sure that it was precisely here that the past happened? The non-site of memory becomes a space of gestures of pointing or indicating: a point or measurable distance (for example when witnesses show the size of ditches where victims were buried by moving their arms), as well as a re-enactment of the past. The witnesses demonstrate how victims behaved – for example by kneeling down in an imaginary ditch – as well as show what the perpetrators did, by raising their hand in a gesture of shooting.

During the course of the aforementioned ceremony in one of the uncommemorated sites of Radechnica (2016), Marianna Zybała, the speaker-witness-trustee, was talking about a forest dugout in which victims hid to escape death. She tried to describe as carefully as possible the overcrowded hideout, using as a measure her husband’s and her own height and their bodies: “It was a kind of [*she makes a gesture sketching out the size*] dugout, more or less, because I was there and I know. [...] Even then we [...] ‘tried on’ the size in this way.” The Zybałas visited Radechnica killing sites regularly after the war, and not only performed standard gestures of commemoration, like lighting candles or praying, but also “tried on” the forest hideout of the mur-

dered Jewish people, as if it were a rehearsal, for a second taking their places in the act of momentary re-enactment (cf. Phelan 1993; Taylor 2004; Schneider 2011). These rehearsals, problematic as they are in their identification with the victims, reveal however both the Zybała's empathy and the irremovable difference between them and the victims: their testimonial gestures may only "try on" the past.

The testimonial performance

"We have come here once again to bow down to the souls of murdered Roma," said Adam Bartosz at the Szczurowa cemetery in 2017 (Recording of Romani Caravan of Memory 2017). "Bowing down" is a much more symbolic gesture than the indexical of pointing. In Bartosz's words is also expressed the iteration of testimonial gestures: sustaining the existence of non-sites of memory depends on repeated performative acts, which may take the form of a testimonial performance.

A set of testimonial gestures which become testimonial performances can be constituted, for example, by a walk – a frequent practice among the witnesses recorded by the Yahad – In Unum organisation, which dedicates itself to identifying the killing sites of the "Holocaust by bullets" in Eastern Europe, gathering testimonies and advocating commemoration of victims. Their testimonies are usually recorded *in situ* and may relate both to individual events (like shootings, transports to execution sites, beatings) and enduring structures of social life, such as life in a ghetto, hiding, and transports to the death camps. A walk as a form of testimony creates particular conditions to exhibit the effects of long-lasting violence and participation of ethnically Polish citizens in a gradual division of inhabited space – in a process of depriving Jewish neighbours of their social relations and rights.

Yet, a walk may also be a testimonial performance arising from an intimate imperative of memory, which is the case for Stanisław and Marianna Zybała. During their walks, they visited burial sites and performed commemorative rituals; they also wrote a guide to Radechnica Jewish graves that enables further witnesses-trustees to participate in the same testimonial practice (Zybała and Zybała 2013). Hence, in a testimonial performance, the body's involvement in the space, where history has taken place, assumes a centrality and the gestures are translated into the symbolic language of ritual. We can see it in the performance organised by Adam Bartosz at the cemetery in Szczurowa in 2012 (Tabor Pamięci 2012). Each person present had to take a piece of paper on which the name, surname and age of a particular victim was written. The participants, both Romani and non-Romani, had to read out this information into a microphone, and place the paper on the mass grave. Bartosz said, "Let us imagine that we all here are that condemned group." In this way, the participants could have gained a real bodily *sense* of what it means to be a member of a group of that same size as the one that had been shot – in the same place they were

standing – seventy years earlier. Although assuming the position of the victims makes this "vicarious re-enactment" (Perry 2019: 21) ethically problematic, especially in the case of non-Romani participants of the performance, the act of reading aloud the names of killed members of Romani community of Szczurowa had a strictly symbolic meaning: it summoned the victims to history, made them grievable (Butler 2010). For decades, the Romani genocide has been forgotten in both European and local Polish history (Kaprański 2012) and in the case of the Polish context, it is precisely the long-lasting presence of the Romani Caravan of Memory that helped it gain public recognition.

The testimonial object

As emphasised in the introductory remarks, the assemblage of testimonial relations created in and around a non-site of memory does not involve merely human actors. Avoiding the dichotomy of nature and culture, in our conceptualisation of testimoniality we consider elements of the landscape – such as soil, greenery, the shape of the terrain – but also objects created by humans as "testimonial objects" (cf. Hirsch and Spitzer 2006). A stone, a tree, an inscription or other material sign in space acquire testimoniality within networks of relations around a killing site, the latter always having a human-nonhuman nature. Necessarily relational, they seem permanently incomplete, but also open to reinterpretation. What distinguishes them from gestures is their materiality, and going beyond indexicality: testimonial objects do not solely point, but commemorate, what makes them closer to icons and symbols.



Figure 1. *Cemetery Symbol* by Stanisław Zybała. Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, INW-A-104. Courtesy of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

The most complex instance of this category that we came across is an object created by Stanisław Zybala in relation to the sites of the Holocaust in Radechnica (kept in the archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, INW-A-104). *Cemetery Symbol* is a wooden bas-relief representing a condensed map of the area, on which the places of uncommemorated burials have been marked with matzevot. The frame of the work also has the shape of a matzevah and includes dates and symbols. If we treat this object as a map, then it is a special, testimonial map with the power to effect change: it reshapes the depicted space of Radechnica, a space covered with numerous killing sites, into a cemetery of its Jewish inhabitants – a paradigm of a site of memory, where the dead are ritually buried and properly commemorated.

The above description of Zybala's testimonial innovation as a bas-relief map is a considerable oversimplification: the work was made with the use of various techniques (cutting in wood, drawing, shading, the use of inlays), as well as using a series of semantic mechanisms: description in language (an integral part of which is text attached to the object), representation, metaphor and metonymy. The symbols located on the frame mobilise various orders which we can use to attempt to interpret Radechnica's painful past: the national (Polish symbol of white eagle), historical (the dates "1942–1943" given also in the Jewish calendar as "5702–5703"), religious (the matzevot and Tablets of Stone of the Decalogue). The tablets are depicted on the left-hand side in their entirety, on the right – the move from left to right is the passage of time, in which Radechnica was subjected to a wave of wartime violence – the tablets are broken, trodden on, depicted as if they were falling out of the wooden background. The head and talons of the eagle are visible at the top and bottom of the object, so the matzevah of the frame in a way substitutes the body of the bird. It is a disturbing combination of a moving expression of grief and somewhat odd, naïve form that produces its peculiar effect: a refusal of forgetting. It is an awkward object (cf. Lehrer and Sendyka 2019), requiring a proliferation of codes and clarifications, but precisely because of this awkwardness the whole communicates the overriding duty of testimony.

Testimonial words

Uncommemorated sites of violence are objects that, by means of their unclear status, resist transformation into widely understood symbolic scripts. There are no images emerging for them, no recognisable narratives, indeed no words which could ease the comprehension of their status. So, it is naturally interesting to look at vernacular ways of assimilating these locations into the language. For example, local inhabitants of Borzęcin call the execution site in the forest the "Gypsy Hills"; in Podleśna Wola (Lesser Poland), two of those taking care of the grave of murdered Roma say they are going "to the Gypsy"; the

inhabitants of Sobibór, when heading off to the area of the death camp, go "to the ghetto"; in Krośnica, the forest where Jews were shot is called by local Romani inhabitants "the Jewish forest". These vernacular descriptions could be called testimonial as they certify the status of sites as locations of events from the past, commemorating them – but in an incomplete, broken and somewhat inappropriate way. It requires further investigation to elucidate to what extent these words might recreate power relations and perpetuate the dynamics of violence from the past, and to what extent they constitute a vehicle for precarious memory about the victims. In everyday use, testimonial words potentially enhance perception of a given space, placing it in the past, mnemonic and affective context, transforming the usual "passing by" into a latent form of commemoration.

Conclusions: testimonial research

The witness is one of the most important and discussed categories (and buzzwords) of Holocaust studies. Who can be a witness, who can write about witnesses, who bears witness and who is merely capable of giving a testimony, who is a "real" witness "from inside" (Felman 1992: 231), contrary to a secondary or vicarious one, or – to use Gary Weissman's (2004) term – a nonwitness? All these typologies are grounded in, firstly, recognising unmediated experience as a sole source of witnessing; secondly, in a moral perception of witnessing; thirdly, in identifying witness in Holocaust research with a position of survivor, or victim from Hilberg's triad. However, as we have argued in the introduction, the testimonial situation needs to be investigated not so much through the reconstruction of the past, as through diagnosing present testimonial positions, transfers and dynamics. If that is the case, our position as researchers may also be interpreted in terms of testimoniality. We need to perceive our practice in the context of testimonial disposition: a disposition not only to acquire and produce knowledge about under-remembered past events, but also to undertake testimonial research, to attempt diagnoses – and self-diagnoses – of memory, care, and possible forms of bearing witness to the past in a post-genocidal society.

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