

Sites of violence and their communities: Critical memory studies in the post-human era (Kraków, 24–25 September 2019)

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Abstract

This discussion gathers voices of an international group of researchers and practitioners from various disciplines and institutions who focus on diverse aspects of sites of past violence in their work: archaeology, history, ethics, literature and art, curatorial practices, oral history, education and commemoration. The debate, which took place during the conference “Sites of Violence and Their Communities: Critical Memory Studies in the Post-Human Era” in Kraków in September 2019, itself centres on six main topics: the question of archives of uncommemorated killing sites; research methodology; the position of the researchers themselves; the problem of complicity during conflict and the right to be a witness to past crimes; the place of the Righteous Among the Nations within Polish collective memory and the international debate on the Holocaust; and, finally, new ways of commemoration and education about mass violence.

Participants: Katarzyna Bojarska, Michał Chojak, Ewa Domańska, Zuzanna Dziuban, Karolina Grzywnowicz, Aleksandra Janus, Karina Jarzyńska, Maria Kobielska, Rob van der Laarse, Bryce Lease, Erica Lehrer, Jacek Leociak, Tomasz Łysak, Tomasz Majkowski, Christina Morina, Matilda Mroz, Adam Musiał, Agnieszka Nieradko, Łukasz Posuszny, Roma Sendyka, Caroline Sturdy Colls, Katarzyna Suszkiewicz, Aleksandra Szczepan, Krijn Thijs, Jonathan Webber, Anna Zagrodzka, Tomasz Żukowski

Key Words

genocide, Holocaust, archive, witness, bystander, complicity, Righteous Among the Nations, mass graves, ethics, commemoration, Holocaust by bullets, education

1. Spaces of mass killings as manifold archive

Roma Sendyka: During the unveiling of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, one of the representatives of the founders in her note to the public said: “Es lebt sich jetzt leichter in diesem Land”: “It’s easier now to live in this country (after this monument was erected).” Holocaust-Mahnmal with its 2,711 concrete slabs symbolises all sites of the murder of the six million victims of Shoah – so it refers also to the sites of the dispersed Holocaust, so numerous in Eastern Europe. These being re-discovered today pose many questions for their stakeholders. Therefore, being from Eastern Europe, when confronted with Holocaust Mahnmal, I did not feel

the relief that the founders of the monument expected. It is not any easier now in Eastern Europe, where many still live “with all these dead under our meadows and fields”, as the writer, Martin Pollack once aptly put it. The symbolic gesture of the Mahnmal changes something in Germany, but it does change almost nothing for someone who lives on the verge of the Lety, Jasenovac or Płaszów concentration camp site which was my first research object. In Poland and Eastern Europe, in general, there are many sites that refer to different types of past violence that escalated in the period of 1939-1945 and they could have potentially constituted *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, yet never were granted such a status. They have not been musealised or commemorated, yet they persistently impact local mnemotopographies. They might be vast or small, in the centre of a city or in the outskirts of a vil-

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lage, overgrown with vegetation or empty, littered or left undisturbed. What is especially important in case of these places is the question of human remains: the reason why these sites do not fall into complete oblivion and are not swallowed by ecological and social reality is that the dead have not been properly buried. Therefore, there is some kind of residual life in these sites: their dead are not completely gone. They stimulate clandestine rituals, practices and “necroperformances” and impact social relations in nearby communities. Hence, the sites are only seemingly removed beyond the horizon of remembrance and symbolical orders that surround them; they do shape local memory cultures. In our project, we embarked on revealing contemporary meanings and functions of such sites and strived to understand their role. We called them non-sites of memory, inspired by Claude Lanzmann, who tried to distance himself from the influential term by Pierre Nora when he travelled in the 1970s through Eastern Europe, filming abandoned post-Holocaust sites. In his dissent, the initial “non” from “*les non-lieux de mémoire*” refers to both parts of the term: it suggests topographical and memorial deficiency that characterises these sites.

Local activists and artists were the first agents to react to these uncommemorated sites. Their works were a huge inspiration for us to construct analysis of these specific objects. So were thinkers pursuing advanced, interdisciplinary research on the environmental, the post-human, the dispersed Holocaust, genocide and human rights. In addition, this electrical field that is being produced between two poles: field/artistic research, based on empirical material on one side and advanced theory on the other, can be, I believe, a generative platform for our discussion on sites of violence and their communities today.

Ewa Domańska: Indeed, in thinking of post-genocidal spaces, inspirations drawn from soil and forensic sciences, as well as from land art, can be especially profitable. The discussion about the decomposition of human remains, how this process is happening and how it affects the soil, especially when we take into consideration environmental (and soil) ethics, might change our approach to how these spaces should be commemorated and preserved. We tend to think that we can preserve or commemorate something for a very long time. Yet, we can observe what is happening with the sites of World War I or events that happened in the 19th century: they stay alive for only as long as we remember them. Therefore, we should be aware that our ways of commemorating sites are temporary. Since our approach to the past, our possibilities, as well as technology in dealing with these spaces are changing, we should think about alternative ways of commemoration. Knowledge of the past in society is becoming severely depleted, so we must address the problem of commemoration from the point of symbolic sensitivity towards evil, violence, injustice and oppression, rather than of knowledge of concrete events. We might think about places marked by institutional cruelty, mass killings or state violence as potential works of art. A symbolic commemoration is more

telling for young people who might not have knowledge about specific historical events, than monuments with dates. In this context, instead of cutting down trees or using chemicals to discipline the plants that are living in these sites – thus using the technology of ecocide to preserve genocide spaces – we should take into consideration their ecological side, understand the importance of keeping alive material, botanic, organic witnesses, which are important not only from a metaphorical point of view. We can learn from forensic botanists how the roots of trees can show how long a body has been in the ground, while seeds can suggest whether or not the body has moved. The presence of particular species of fauna that are atypical for a given site can also help locate mass graves. So, trees and plants are not only metaphorical ecowitnesses, they are also survivors, pieces of forensic evidence and ecohistorical sources (camp arborglyphs). Therefore, we need strong cooperation between artists, humanities scholars and conservationists.

Jonathan Webber: From this perspective, what should the Polish government do then with the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau? Reconstruct the barracks or let them sink into the ground in the next hundred years?

Ewa Domańska: In the very long term, the barracks have more chances of remaining below the ground than above it. For a very long time already, I have advocated the idea that such sites should be kept in a state of controlled decomposition and ruination with limited access. Of course, museums, monuments, education etc. should sustain the memory of the events in the form of documentary movies, maps, photographs, 3D visualisations and other means of representation.

Jacek Leociak: I am thinking how to incorporate Ewa Domańska’s ideas about the significance of soil into studies on Holocaust history. If we think about the Ringelblum Archive, which was buried in the ground and then unearthed after World War II, we can understand it in terms of Greek philosophy. I think about the concept of Empedocles: the four elements – earth, water, air and fire – as elementary components of matter, forming the principles of being. In some sense, the documents from Ringelblum Archive survived the trial of earth, water, air and fire. They are marked by some kind of stigma, the materiality of these documents being wounded, in both a metaphorical and forensic sense. Abraham Sutzkever, one of the greatest poets in the Yiddish language, who was imprisoned in the Vilna ghetto, wrote, in that time, a poem in which he compared the burying of the library of Vilna in the ground to sowing the seeds in the soil. Seeds are hidden in the ground, but they are not dead, they are still alive and waiting for the time of growing.

Jonathan Webber: It is worth noting that Sutzkever’s idea is related to the classic Talmudic idea of the resurrection of the dead, in which the dead, buried in the earth, are simply waiting for the next stage.

Ewa Domańska: And, therefore, they should not be disturbed.

Krijn Thijs: I want to put another issue on the table from the Western European point of view. When we talk about non-sites of memory and the afterlife of localisations after the historical events, we talk about places where human remains are usually still in the soil, where people were buried or not. Yet, in the Netherlands, many places which we consider sites of genocide are not defined by human remains. These are sites used for hiding or deportations, but we need to remember that the killing during the Holocaust was happening in the so-called *bloodlands*. Would the approach of soil studies also work in cases of sites without human remnants, where the knowledge about the place is grounded in stories or other types of traces?

Aleksandra Szczepan: And yet, we need to remember that the very concept of *bloodlands* is not a neutral term, but renders othering and colonial bias: as in similar compounds, such as *bloodstain* or *bloodshed*, blood in this topographical category changes the ontological status of the terrains it refers to and expresses the Western othering gaze on the East.

Ewa Domańska: I am mostly interested in sites where there are human remains. However, if we think about these sites from the perspective of what is going on in the soil, we might take into consideration various material objects and we can think how, for example, rust may change the structure and the components of the soil. We should read soil (and forests) as a sort of natural archive with different layers.

Agnieszka Nieradko: When undertaking archival research, it is often astonishing to realise that the information we are looking for today, after 70 years, was available from the very beginning since the end of the war. It applies to the documents as well as oral history, or both. Yet now, our chances are very small and it is so frustrating to know that we are coming 10, 20 years too late.

Katarzyna Bojarska: If the information about these sites is “already there”, in the archive – what makes it forgotten? Or is it repressed? What prevents it from entering the canon? Perhaps we should think of non-sites of memory as consisting of two parallel and complementary archives, one of traditional documents and the other of what’s there in the ground. It is there and it just has to come up, be it a material object, a narrative or a ritual in the community. In this sense, researching on non-sites of memory might be a way of mediating between these two archives and trying to create a canon – to use Aleida Assmann’s distinction – to make this past sharable and to render it as a matter of collective memory and care.

Aleksandra Janus: The case of the site of the former Nazi death camp in Sobibór might be a good example. It

shows the potential of soil studies, especially when dealing with sites or parts of the terrain that do not contain Jewish human remains. Studying such parts during the archaeological works in Sobibór, revealed that soil is a living archive with a strikingly accurate imprint of the camp recorded in the sandy ground in the form of darker marks left by objects and infrastructure. There are also places where the ground is very different because of the number of people who walked through it – as in the case of the *Himmelstrasse* – a road going from the train to the gas chambers. When we stand in non-sites of memory, seemingly there is nothing there, yet the soil and forest might contain very powerful imprints of what happened.

Robert van der Laarse: Sobibór archaeological works create an interesting theoretical case when we think about the questions of what heritage is whose heritage. Some name plates of children killed there were found during the works and an inheritance conflict emerged between the survivors, relatives of the victims and the Polish government. The families wanted to have these name plates back, yet the Polish authorities did not agree to give them away since they consider them national heritage as being found in Polish soil. From a Dutch perspective, such an approach turns heritage into a loaded concept in contrast to a dynamic notion of cultural heritage focusing on meaning and valuation. From such perspective, children’s Jewish family would have expected to have received the objects “back” as the righteous owner. Something also happened between the Netherlands and Israel, when the Leiden Jewish community requested the “return” of their Nazi looted Torah Cloak from the collection of the Israel Museum. The Museum had received it from the Allies after the War and refused such restitution while arguing that Jewish heritage could never be claimed back from the State of Israel as the only national representative of the vanished Jewish world. When we work on recovering campsites and their virtual reconstructions, we sometimes encounter comparable lack of comprehension for our actions. “It’s just a forest now, why are you forcing people to remember the long-vanished past”? Yet, for me, every object and every site is a very specific archive, a very multi-layered one. For instance, already in 1946, committees working on Jewish history, found a lot of information; we know, for example, all the names of 33,000 Jews from the Netherlands, where they lived, where they came from, how they ended up in all sorts of camps. However, the archive is also built up by archaeological work to unknown victims, which has been done in several waves: in the 1960s, 1980s and again today. We need to remember, however, that a lot of memory work has been executed within different frameworks. The paradigm shifts are enormous: perhaps the reason why we do not know much about such former archives is because we do not speak their language anymore. We come from a different culture. We look since 1989 from a post-Cold War gaze at these sites without acknowledging the former gaze on the camps in the East and the West. In the West, there

are a number of historical works about the Holocaust that date from the 1960s (including the first American monograph under that title), yet nobody reads them anymore. Therefore, part of our task is actually being a translator of our own past: how our own gaze and frames affect current memory work, how spatial, digital, forensic turns changed the ways we are doing our research in spaces, on materiality and even on human bodies, which past historians would never have dared to address.

2. Ways of researching sites of violence

Roma Sendyka: I wonder if we can think – in the context of soil and forensic studies – about violence as a generative force, as Max Bergholz puts it. How could we ethically combine this view of violence which can create new phenomena with the preventative standpoint of “never again”?

Ewa Domańska: René Girard, in his book *Violence and the Sacred*, claims that there is good violence and bad violence. This is certainly a very ambiguous idea and on a general level, it might lead to very dangerous generalisations that we want to avoid. Firstly, I always say: Go to the case study and examine the problem on the basis of a very concrete example. Secondly, we need to rethink the preventative potential of genocide/Holocaust studies. I like the idea of coming back to apotropaic symbols that have been used in many different cultures. How in our post-secular condition might we rethink the role of apotropaic symbols: textual, visual, material? If W.J.T. Mitchell is right with his idea that images “go before us” whenever a commemorative monument is designed, I would ask what future does it anticipate? Are we able, as scholars, to build a social imaginary that would protect us from bad violence or prevent possible bad violence from happening? How might our texts, poems, paintings or photos really prefigure a more positive future? Currently, public space is filled with catastrophic images, apocalyptic visions of what’s next. Can we focus on those aspects of our past that show that history might have happened otherwise and use this unfulfilled potential of various collaborations, cohabitations etc.? I’m thinking about the phenomenal project of the Israeli artist and scholar Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History*, in which she shows that history between Israel and Palestine could have been different. Therefore, I would ask: How might our projects that are related to post-genocidal spaces be transformative and preventative? What if we do not focus only on commemorating or stimulating discussion on how to commemorate a place, but investigate if there is anything preventative about them? Images of non-sites of memory might have a huge impact on the social (collective) consciousness that is undergoing a serious right-wing turn, not only in Poland. We are in a situation in which we cannot become bystanders. We must learn from our own research.

Let’s move out of humanities, just for inspiration, let’s revitalise our thinking by infusing humanities and social sciences with ideas and concepts coming from geography, soil science, dendrology or ethology. Let’s think about the ecosystem of a killing site right now and how this place might be turned into a valuable environmental site which, at the same time, is stigmatised by the events that happened in the past. Perhaps social archaeology combined with forensic archaeology might help? I wonder if Caroline Sturdy Colls sees this kind of movement in archaeology that would give us hope that there is really a necessity and possibility to merge the humanities with the natural sciences. Do you feel it yourself as a scholar contributing to this movement?

Caroline Sturdy Colls: Yes, I would like to think that. I am trained as an archaeologist with expertise in forensic archaeology so I have worked in a present context, with missing persons’ cases where the framework is to get a very black and white answer and there is a necessity to say: “This is exactly what happened.” However, that is a problematic concept in the forensic sphere, in general. There are ways in which archaeology and forensics go together: they are both about search and identification of the evidence, but there are also significant differences. Archaeology is obviously always about probabilities and I use the words “probable mass grave” a lot. My work has been very interdisciplinary and there are many different techniques that we can use which draw from different disciplines; in some sense, archaeology is about loaning techniques from other fields. I combine many different approaches: aerial photography, laser technology, LIDAR, remote sensing tools, geophysical methods. The non-invasive approach relies very much on the comparison of different types of datasets and, as technology evolves, we borrow tools and technologies from, for example, games design, computing and visualisations mechanisms and we can interrogate those data in different and interesting ways. However, the fact remains that excavation is the only way to get absolute proof. There are many misconceptions about these technologies because we are not in a position where we have an X-ray machine that will show us what is beneath the ground. In that sense, this work is also about managing expectations.

I think personally, particularly given Holocaust denial, it is more important to be honest about what you are doing than trying to make your findings fit a predefined hypothesis. Additionally, that is still often a very uncomfortable notion for many people who are working within the forensic arena. Certainly, in the context of the Holocaust, the emotional and ethically sensitive nature of the topic is of utmost importance and it cannot be completely removed from it. Therefore, I, for example, work with artists a lot – since art can communicate certain things that you cannot within other spheres. This has been for me one way to explore issues of forensic truth. By working closely with artists, we can explore what it means when you have an object and four possible interpreta-

tions of it or what it means ethically when your findings contradict what a survivor is adamant about.

Aleksandra Janus: Perhaps, following the artists' gaze as researchers, we can spot things that have escaped our attention and are located in the particular register of vernacular memory. In works of artists, such as Karolina Grzywnowicz and Anna Zagrodzka, who engage with sites of past violence, attention to the ground, narrowing the field of vision, reaching down low, underfoot, following tracks – this can all be viewed as evidence of forensic sensitivity. In addition, it is a key point that our gaze is often drawn to what has been insufficiently told or expressed. Perhaps it cannot be expressed fully or at all. Yet, this specific kind of sensitivity to reality, exemplified in artistic activity, may be of value as an epistemological tool. Contemporary artistic and academic research practice often puts into question the radical distinction between science and art as two different means of relating to the world and we see growing interested in all forms of art-based research. Artists with their tools and methods may significantly deepen our understanding of phenomena that are of interest to scientists.

Karolina Grzywnowicz: My practice is mainly research-based and I often work with specialists from different fields: botanists, soil scientists, hydrologists, but also local specialists and members of local communities. I am very interested in how humans mark the territory and how we can read the landscape as a liminal archive. According to the forensic approach, every gesture leaves a trace and I am searching for these kinds of traces. For me, everything started with the project *Weeds* in 2014, when I visited the south-east part of Poland where in the 1940s, after World War II, 620,000 people (Ukrainians, Boykos and Lemkos) were forced to leave their villages due to resettlements. Most of these villages were burned down, so there are no clearly visible traces that people used to live there, although it was a densely-populated area. I tried to find these villages and the only evidence that people used to live there were plants. I realised that, by knowing the plants, we can not only mark the places, but also restore the topography of these non-existing villages. I wanted to create a guide for people who want to go there and discover these places by themselves, so I made a website with a map and the plants' descriptions: for instance, if you find a periwinkle, it is very likely that a cemetery was located there, because it is an evergreen plant and people in this region used to plant it on graves. As I wanted to bring up this very marginalised topic of history and this quite marginalised region to the centre, therefore, I decided to present an exhibition in Warsaw at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art. I transported 20 m² of the meadow from these villages and, after the show, I re-installed it in a public space in Warsaw.

During my research, I realised that these villages function as taboo spaces: local people never go there and they really discouraged me to visit those sites. But of course, I

did. I tried to work with the community in places situated near a non-existing village, in Studenne. I decided to invite people for a walk to encourage them to go there. We went for a walk, during which we discovered remnants of former buildings and a cemetery. Many people who came for this walk visited this abandoned village for the first time, even if they lived only a five-minute walk away.

The last project I did, together with the choreographer Agata Siniarska, was an installation about Nazi violent practices towards nature. Agata's performance, inspired by Pola Nireńska's *Holocaust Tetralogy* and thinking about the body as the archive, was set in a garden that I designed. I researched how Nazis used plants to camouflage camps, gas chambers or mass graves, but also how they planted beautiful plants like roses or rhododendrons in the gardens in, for example, the Auschwitz Camp. Therefore, I used plates as in a botanical garden with descriptions and stories about these different violent practices.

Anna Zagrodzka: I am an engineer and photographer by profession. In my work, I examine the relationship between art and science and each of my projects is based on multidirectional research. I am interested in the visual reference of how nature transforms the traces of history in former extermination camps and how the biology of the environment invades the structure of the camp buildings with the organic matter. I use a microscope to take photos of the moulds that can be found at the camp sites and I try to present them in the most abstract way. I want to show something beautiful that can pose a serious threat to people. Another observation is the analysis of dependence of selected moulds and their interaction, the competition between species and their struggle. It is a denial of the romantic vision of nature. My work is based on microbiological research that shows that some moulds can be almost exclusively found in the death camps. I also try to show how the conservation philosophy towards camp sites has changed over the years and illustrate the micro-level of the conservation processes at the Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. For instance, until the 1980s, decaying poplars at the camp site were being replaced. Later, the Museum's authorities started to conserve these trees. I'm interested in how the politics of nature transforms in places like this. Nature tends to confirm Oskar Hansen's vision of monument: it is a search for continuity. It starts with life, passes to death and then returns to another life.

Katarzyna Bojarska: Simon Schama wrote in *Landscape and Memory* that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape. Yet, I think what both Karolina Grzywnowicz and Anna Zagrodzka are doing is redirecting this relationship: they look at raw matter and treat it not as something mute or voiceless, but rather as something meaningful. It is our inability to translate that renders "raw matter" speechless. Therefore, artists' work is an act of translation of something that

is undecipherable, seemingly meaningless. What I mean by translation here is not explaining the object, but rather relating ourselves, our bodies and imagination, to it. In this sense, artists exercise a particular “right to look”: the more skilled you are, the more literate in reading signs and traces of the past. As translators, armed with imagination and investigative skills, they are our guides in seeing more, wanting to see more and looking where we thought there was nothing see (or where we were not expected to look). There is also a question of power that is disarmed in those non-violent practices of caring: taking care of the sites of past violence, taking care of those plants, something that is associated with a very feminine gesture and belongs to a female tradition of land art, created also by such Polish artists as Teresa Murak, Elżbieta Janicka, Diana Lelonek or Joanna Rajkowska. Therefore, there are particular ethics of investigative care in these projects. Finally, both projects deconstruct the understanding of life on the sites of death. They show that there is a continuity of life, but in different forms: different forms of life and different forms of continuity, not necessarily anthropocentric.

Roma Sendyka: Artists are important trail-blazers as far as the actions they undertake in the post-violence areas: I mean not only artist visits, political walks, nature walks, testimonial walks and processions that direct attention and elevate the need to understand the site and its history. Some of these practices can even become radical: very often breaking through, trespass, secretly entering is exactly the way or the only way the artist can get closer and take us with her to the site. So, memory-inspired movement is key problem to discuss. Another is linked with materiality. When artists engage with post-genocidal *objets trouvés*, ethical questions arise. In the post-human era, we are seriously concerned not only with agency, but also with sovereignty of objects. We need, therefore, to consider – what was mentioned before by Ewa Domańska – the right to be left undisturbed, to moulder and decay. If we rescue an object from the earth, do we observe its rights or do we ignore them? Is that an act of care or human domination? We urgently need to answer an ethical question how to responsibly interact with spaces, plants and objects of uncommemorated sites we research.

Matilda Mroz: I would like to add to these different types of walks a walk that Claude Lanzmann is performing when he brings back Szymon Srebrnik to the site of the death camp. So, he is taking people to the site where there seems to be nothing to see. Yet, Karolina Grzywnowicz’s walk seems to be a completely different model from what Lanzmann is doing with landscape. Lanzmann shows us how we think about landscape and nature that seems to be indifferent to human presence, whereas there is something else too about our being indifferent to natural presence.

Katarzyna Bojarska: I am thinking about Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between loss and absence. According

to him, loss is always material, concrete and absence is abstract. Yet, in a post-genocidal context, absence is a fact, it is material: there were people, there were villages and there are no more. Whether this absence is transformed into loss for us who live here is because of artists, researchers and artists as researchers, who go to those sites and work very carefully to establish that affective relationship of loss. It can be seen as another version of what Ariella Azoulay called civil contract of photography: it is a civil contract of art, in a sense that those practices – post factum, long after the events – enable us to re-establish the bond of citizenship. We can form this affective space where the possibility of addressing our former co-citizens appears, we mark those sites in different ways and live in and with them in different ways. Researchers, activists and artists meet to address the absence and form an affective space for working out and living with loss, not taking it for granted.

Erica Lehrer: I would like to raise a critical issue related to such artistic interventions. There was an article by Maria Dembek in a recent issue of *Holocaust Studies* that points out that we tend to talk so much about the philosophy and ideology of our projects, which we develop as we are planning them, but rarely is there meaningful research carried out afterwards to assess what their actual effects were. This seems especially relevant when dealing with socially engaged projects that involve local communities. Dembek discusses a project combining arts and archaeology, called *The Cut*, that was done in Muranów, sponsored by the Polin Museum. Her argument is that the lack of a critical discourse framing this public performance of unearthing objects meant that it played into an un-worked-through process in Poland regarding the meaning of “digging for things.” It risked normalising and perpetuating for local viewers issues raised by Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross in *Golden Harvest*, rather than opening them to critical questioning. So, we need to ask ourselves what the actual effects are when we engage people to participate in the projects we make. What unintended effects might we unleash, which may work against our goals?

3. Positionality in the research on genocide

Caroline Sturdy Colls: As you know, a lot of my research is about finding ways not to dig and not encountering human remains in the context of the Holocaust. However, the issue of looting is still very prevalent, particularly in Ukraine where I have been working recently. Many of the projects, in which I have been engaged, feel more like rescue archaeology projects. Often, we visit a site with tools and technology only to find that the looters have already uncovered human remains. Looting the sites, taking metal – it is also about normalisation of objects like teeth. The same problems appear with memorials: founders know they will be destroyed, little pieces of metal and stone tak-

en, so it has to be decided what to build new memorials from. We are going to a site to undertake non-invasive research, but our job is often to rebury these remains, to find a way to protect them, to prevent those lootings from happening. Additionally, of course, for that we can count on local authorities, who assure us these actions should be prosecuted and whom we often witness trying to protect sites, but we have also encountered indifference to this. Therefore, the work we are doing becomes evidence in a public form. Therefore, my work will never just fit into the box of forensic archaeology because it is about public truth, it is about activism, it is about exploring some of these uncomfortable issues as well.

Ewa Domańska: The research on robbing mass graves requires a lot of sensitivity, also because it might go into the box of scandalous research. I find it shocking as a person living here and now, but it was probably not so unusual at that time, in the context of war. In addition, we must put it in the proper historical context.

Zuzanna Dziuban: In my research, I ask about the continuity between the “here and now” and the conditions in which the practice of grave looting could have become normalised. Contextualisation is important, but so too is the question around sensibilities which have survived the war and perpetuate deep into the post-war period. The durability of these sentiments can hardly be explained by the extreme conditions of war. In fact, I would argue that to think about these practices exclusively through the prism of the war serves to explain them away. That is why in my talk about the afterlives of objects looted from the dead, the central example came from an interview given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2000 by Regina Prudnikova. In a startlingly emotionless manner, she admits to having implanted in her own mouth two gold teeth looted from Jewish victims of an execution. She bought the teeth after the war, fully aware of their disturbing provenance. Even in 2000, she does not seem particularly disconcerted about having profited from the death of members of the othered minority – she has it all rationalised. Thanks to historical research, we know that both grave robberies and the reuse of dental gold were quite widespread and normalised practices. I, in turn, look at contemporary contexts to see how, especially for the immediate participants of those events, this normalisation and the frames and sensibilities that enabled it are still being perpetuated today.

Robert van der Laarse: The question is also if this happened only to Jews or also to Poles or to Germans, since there were many dead bodies being found. That would be a very interesting question: what difference it made at the time.

Zuzanna Dziuban: We know from historical research that German war graves were also robbed. In this case, too, the grave robberies unfolded across ethnic lines.

However, I think that comparisons drawn between those cases are somewhat misleading and serve to analytically downplay the practice. We should bear in mind, for instance, the difference between the grave of a defeated enemy and the mass grave of brutally murdered fellow citizens. In the case of Jewish graves, it was othering, anti-Semitism and the anti-Semitic myth of Jewish gold that played an important part. Grave robbery is a form of economic violence, but it also has a political dimension.

Therefore, in my writing I tried to intervene in the way in which this practice is framed as a treasure hunt or gold hunt because this framing reproduces, to a certain extent, the logic behind the practice. Grave robbery perpetrated at the burial sites of a defeated enemy or a member of othered minority constitutes a practice of alterity and dehumanisation and not merely a gain-orientated act. It is the politics of dead bodies. It took us a long time to reframe in these terms the practices of racially driven, colonial looting of indigenous and aboriginal graves, as a form of political violence. I think we should also open up our research on practices pertaining to the Holocaust to more critical approaches, not critical in terms of post-humanities, but also critical in terms of taking a step back and looking critically at our own practices of normalisation. I consider the urge, experienced also by researchers, to downplay or explain away the grave robberies as one such practice.

Łukasz Posluszny: We have a problem with presentism in discussing these issues. I have a feeling that Regina Prudnikova was not unsettled at all giving this interview. It is upsetting much more to us than people in the historical context. We need to think about the prolonged existence of some structures: Holocaust mass graves or concentration camps had a longer history in terms of social tools or inventions. I wonder if it is possible to undertake an investigation in terms of the biography of an object, of going back and studying whether there were such practices of looting in Lithuania or Belarus earlier, also in the context of colonial, maybe very localised experience. Perhaps, it was happening earlier and there was nothing strange about it, maybe it was a general practice or knowledge that was already known?

Roma Sedyka: We need to engage cultural historical anthropology to fully understand this. It indeed might have been perceived as a normal practice known from the past. The whole gesture of casting is as old as the Bible which testifies the casting of a golden calf from personal gold of stateless Jews. Therefore, something that is made of retrieved gold, as well as casting, represent a very old symbolic moment with a long political and moral history. Research on everyday practices would shed some light on rules of recycling of objects belonging to the diseased, those of my kin and those considered being “the Other”. War-time looting as a social practice may also add needed information on such extreme acts. What is so unusual about the example researched by Zuzanna Dziuban is the

final bodily, somatic aspect of the re-appropriation. Ethical questions pile up and I believe anthropology may help us to understand (which will not mean: justify) at least some aspects of the practice. I feel that anthropology, supposed to study steady patterns of human behaviour, is too rarely summoned to aid Holocaust research, as if all of the events of the Shoah were unprecedented. As Hannah Arendt a long time ago and, recently, scholars working in Kraków on the “banality of forgetting” stated (Jacek Nowak, Sławomir Kaprański, Dariusz Niedźwiedzi): much of what happened during the “state of exception” was “banal” and “everyday”. It is important to see the “everyday practices” beyond what shocks us as a transgression, because what is at stake is not to raise “dark” excitement or express indignation or stigmatise, but to understand what, why and how something happened.

Katarzyna Bojarska: Where does our shock, our discomfort come from? Since you mentioned colonialism, that Holocaust logic is colonial logic, we need to think that there is another type of logic at play here: the capitalist logic. She bought the tooth and it was on the market. The production of the commodity was violent – and that is what capitalism is about.

Tomasz Łysak: There is a character in Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* who has all his teeth knocked out and then he replaces the ones he lost with gold. In the process, he changes his identity so the gold teeth mean a new identity. We might ask how popular gold teeth were before the war. Additionally, what did it actually mean when the teeth were transferred? It was also an economic transfer, yet not all people could afford gold teeth, so maybe there were also other materials from which teeth were made. Were they also transferred?

Zuzanna Dziuban: As far as I know, there is no existing anthropological study that presents an argument to suggest that this kind of engagement with corpses was culturally permissible. Grave robbery was a transgressive practice in the pre-war period. This transgressive act was suspended during the war and in its aftermath, conditioned by the transient circumstances of war, violence and impunity. However, grave robberies cut deep into the post-war period. There are places, as noted by Caroline Sturdy Colls, where it still unfolds. In Poland, the participation of local inhabitants in the process of extermination, because of the proximity of camps and killing sites, definitely contributed to the normalisation of grave looting. Yet, this activity was illegal both in pre-war and in the post-war period and was critically addressed by post-war authorities: in 1946, a new law was introduced, which strengthened penalties for grave robbery as compared to the pre-war period. This set legislation in place to cast grave robbery as a criminal practice. Thanks to research on colonial conquest, Armenian genocide, the Vietnam War and the Spanish Civil War, we know that the practice of scavenging from the bodies and graves of

the dead during and following periods of armed conflict and political violence is a universal phenomenon, present across cultures and geographies. Indeed, it is often a temporal distance from the events and taboo-breaching practices (and sensitivities behind them) that first enables research. Sometimes research is driven by the need to delegitimise those sensitivities. What I see in Poland, especially in response to the publication of Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross’s book *Golden Harvest*, is a conceptual, epistemic process of knowledge production that keeps this practice normalised or domesticated and a critical intervention at bay.

Erica Lehrer: There was an exhibition in the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in 2016 called *Bogactwo (Money to Burn)*. It was about the Polish post-war cultural imagination regarding wealth. I was immediately struck by the absence of Jewish themes amongst the works or in the curatorial text. Surely Jews must figure in here somewhere? Where was the *Żyd z pieniążkiem* (Jew with a coin), this incredibly popular, iconic image with such a long history? However, there was one piece, which I originally read as an absence, that I now recognise as perhaps rather a subtle artistic presence related to the theme of Jews and wealth. It was a piece by Ewa Axelrad: a huge photographic magnification of a gold tooth, entitled *Is It Safe* (2012). Still, the absence of any interpretive materials suggesting the Jewish theme made me wonder about cultural memory, about the ability or desire of Poles – even progressive Polish curators – to discuss that issue.

Tomasz Żukowski: I am interested in the social context of these practices. I remember, for example, an article by Ludwik Stomma in *Tygodnik Powszechny* in 1946 about installations for the gold miners in Oświęcim area and a remark that some of their houses were built thanks to the findings. So, the problem from where the money flows was apparently known to the whole community. Therefore, I am interested in the question “what was the reaction of how the miners were perceived by the community where they lived”? For example, in Henryk Grynberg’s *Dziedzictwo (Heritage)*, there is a passage where the local man says to Grynberg: “That house was built from the gold robbed from the dead.” There is no reaction in the community. For me, it is really a great problem how to investigate what happens in the communities.

Zuzanna Dziuban: There are testimonies from inhabitants of villages neighbouring with extermination camps that enable a deeper look into the social context of the practice. The memorial Museum at Bełżec has conducted dozens of interviews in which grave robbery is addressed, including by people who admit to participating in it, in the 1940s and in the 1950s, long after the end of the war. We know that this happened at all former camps in Poland and that the practice had a mass character. According to testimonies, “everybody participated” in the searches. During my research on Bełżec, Treblinka and Sobibór,

I learned that the areas of the former camps were divided amongst groups, sometimes families, competing for profit. It was not uncommon that, in order to avoid capture by the police, the looters would transfer human remains to the nearby woods, houses and barns, to examine them there. In some cases, armed gangs would protect the sites from the intervention of law enforcement agencies. Men, women and children would participate in the searches hand in hand. The looting continued deep into the post-war period, resulting in few arrests and boosting local economies, which is also evidenced by recent research. Even if the looting of the dead were not practised or accepted by all members of the local populace, it was a widespread and normalised social practice, in which the bodies of the dead and their graves were performatively and discursively dehumanised and acted upon as a mere source of monetary gain.

There is a fascinating example to evince this: in the aftermath of the War, a Jewish survivor, the head of the Jewish community of Tomaszów Lubelski, Szmul Pelc, visited Bełżec and, outraged by what he saw, alerted the authorities in Lublin. There was an exchange of letters between the authorities in Lublin, Tomaszów Lubelski and Bełżec, which offers a fascinating example of the work of cultural translation. While the documents exchanged between Lublin and Tomaszów Lubelski and sent by Tomaszów Lubelski to Bełżec unequivocally condemn the practice and cast it as desecration of human remains, as it was legally framed at that time, the public announcement issued by the Mayor of Bełżec requested that it be brought to an end because it constituted stealing from the state treasury. Locally, amongst its participants, the deeper transgressiveness of grave robbery was completely arrested and naturalised. I feel that our responsibility as researchers is to restore this elementary ambiguity, to critically re-read our conceptualisations of the practice and unpack the processes of closure and its consequences and continuities.

4. Witnesses? Bystanders? Participants? Dwellers of the non-sites of memory

Roma Sendyka: When we think about Hilberg's classic triangle of victims, perpetrators and bystanders, we consider subjects having different agencies. However, we forget that this categorisation comes as a matter of fact from the encounter with Claude Lanzmann's film which comes, in turn, from Raul Hilberg, who based his research on German administrative documents from the war-time era. So, in a sense, we are working with subjectivity constructions from the 1940s and fashioned – in fact – by the perpetrators. Perhaps, if we apply some newer approaches, such as Margaret Archer's relational sociology, we could proceed not with supposedly stable subjective positions (of a perpetrator, its victim and nearby onlooking bystander), but rather complicate and dynamise the social panorama focusing on relations between actants.

With this move, we could see the whole field blurred, precarious and situational: the social fabric around non-sites of memory could become less obvious when we observe the complex processes of implication, highlighted recently by Michael Rothberg. We could then grasp the system in motion: see how the classic attributions overlap and change or accumulate in one person, but only for a brief period of time, to become changed under new conditions evoked by ever-changing framework of violence. Perhaps, a change in epistemological approaches for our research on uncommemorated sites might help to grasp the problem in a more multiperspective, complex way?

Krijn Thijs: I am very eager to dwell on the categories used not only by the researchers, but also by the contemporaries to figure out the historical setting of what is happening during a crime. Michał Chojak lists in his typology of the witnesses interviewed by Yahad – In Unum, the curious ones; those who were forced to watch; the neighbours; the occasional witnesses; and the requisitioned. I am interested in the last category which comprises people who actually participated in the crime and epitomises the paradox we all work with in Holocaust studies, the problem of complicity. How do these witnesses see the way their testimonies are used in the research? Do they feel comfortable when they see that, in the eyes of the researchers, they were kind of essential to the process of killing? Is there any kind of discussion on this with the people whom the Yahad team interviews?

Michał Chojak: We are very transparent with the witnesses about how our work will be disseminated in academic and educational contexts. It needs to be stated that in Holocaust studies, we tend to use a modern, Western European filter to understand the event. However, for people who were requisitioned and whom we interview, there is no question of complicity. They do not think in these terms. To be requisitioned is a rural tradition which was common before the War, both in Poland and in the Soviet Union, where local administration used to ask villagers to do something for the good of the community: to clean streets from the snow or dig a silo ditch for crops. These kinds of practices were known for peasants and, when German troops arrived in these terrains, they used this existing system of requisitions in the framework of the killing. I never discussed complicity with a witness. For them, they did this because a representative of the local administration or the local police or the German himself, came to their house with an order: "Tomorrow at 8 o'clock, you will come to the town hall with your shovel." The killings involved not only people themselves, but also material tools and objects used by peasants during their everyday work. The genocide was deeply rooted in rural life.

Jacek Leociak: We face the problem of the witness here on many levels: on the level of methodology, the level of the Holocaust experience and the level of human experience, in general. I must disagree with Michał Chojak's

claim about Western categories that make us biased in the perception of the time and space of the Holocaust. I do not think so. We must try to elaborate, as precisely as possible, a typology of witnessing to the extreme experiences and this kind of typology must cover universal human possibilities of reaction to such events. We must abandon the triangle typology of bystanders, perpetrators and victims. It is time to elaborate a profound notion of what it means to be a witness and to discuss if it is possible to be a witness to such extreme experiences. The example of the requisitioned reminds us that we cannot apply such an old-fashioned category to people who participated in this killing machinery. There were many agents of this process: soldiers, gendarmes or policemen who just shot the victims. However, there were also various types of participants, not witnesses, just participants.

Zuzanna Dziuban: I also find the Yahad – In Unum’s typology of witnesses problematic. You mentioned requisitioned witnesses, but what about those voluntarily requisitioned? How do you locate this kind of person at the killing site? We know from the historical research that there were groups of people volunteering to bury the dead or to participate in the executions and they did so primarily in order to steal from the victims. If we keep conceptualising the positionality of those local populations in terms of witnessing, as they do themselves, we risk reproducing the framework in which they position themselves. In this way, instead of intervening critically, we might simply perpetuate the framework which has been in place since World War II. This is not about distorted memory of the participants of those events, but about a certain vision of reality, which should be addressed critically. When addressing colonisation, we certainly do not feel the urge to take on the perspective of the colonisers – we look at it critically. This approach is as much ethical as it is political and we should extend it to analyse how subjects – who contributed to the implementation of the Holocaust in various ways – naturalised, domesticated and interpreted their positionality not as complicit, but forced to participate in genocide.

Michał Chojak: The Yahad – In Unum’s classification of witnesses does not reflect our understanding of the category of witness, but rather refers to types of people one can meet today in the villages or towns of Eastern Europe. We consider the witnesses as witnesses in terms of criminology and define them through their motivation or simply the reasons that led them to become witnesses of the killing. Certainly, we should be critical towards these categories. I do not mention voluntary participants because it is difficult to find people who would accept to speak openly about their involvement and motives. The categories I use come from people who agreed to talk to us and who, in this way, explained to us the reason why they had been present at the crime scene. Our priority is gathering information about the events; therefore, we cannot openly discuss complicity because we would risk the

interview not happening. If we feel comfortable with the witness, if we see that the witness is answering questions without trouble, we may ask some more detailed or deeper questions about their perception of the issue of complicity. This is a task for researchers who analyse these materials to find answers to more complicated questions.

Roma Sendyka: Michał Chojak showed the conditions of being auxiliary to the killings and, as a keen fan of researching the middle grounds, I do not think that putting a clear alternative voluntary or requisitioned, will take us any further than we are now. Mary Fulbrook in her analysis of bystanders, proposes, in the first place, anthropological research on the violence field. Following this method, we should consider, for instance, the history of serfdom, this conditioning to answer the needs coming from above as an important factor. First, we should understand the realities, then draw conclusions if that was voluntary or not. We need to find a way and a language, perhaps specific for an area in question, that will not let us repeat far-fetched assumptions, often derivative of central and – we need to admit – elitists perspectives or from even more distant to the specific site global Holocaust studies. I advocate for more “situated” (as Donna Haraway put it) studies, that take time to research grass-roots, vernacular knowledges, not to uncritically normalise them, but to gain reference points to knowledge built centrally in our highly specialised educational institutions.

Katarzyna Bojarska: Perhaps the participants of the past scenarios can become the witnesses or informants of the present ones. We might want to try to make the participants of these past events our informants, our witnesses. This category needs to be critically reworked.

Robert van der Laarse: In the reconstruction of the notion of bystander, we also need to take into consideration historical differences. For instance, the point of ideology, nationalism and fascism is important to understand the position of bystander in Germany, while, on the other hand, in the occupied Netherlands, which lacked a strong authoritarian, anti-Semitic tradition, the situation, as well as the experience and self-image of “bystanders” was distinct.

Christina Morina: Certainly, these ideological aspects are specific to each of those societies, but, at the same time, if the concept is to be successful, it has to be positioned on a meta-level so that it is broadly applicable. It is important to pay respect to that and take it into consideration, but, at the same time, it can also obscure the underlying anthropological and social dynamics that are at play regardless of the ideology. Dehumanising, exclusionary social practices and processes work according to similar logics and are, to a certain degree, fully independent from ideology and focusing on them enhances our ability conduct comparative research on other forms of systemic violence.

Zuzanna Dziuban: What I feel uneasy about is that when we develop our conceptualisations of bystanding, we all too often adopt the perspective of those who construct themselves as “bystanders” and witnesses and, as a result, this perspective is perpetuated without problematising the concept. We need to think about how the difference between testimonies of various actors is constituted and how the perspective on bystanding changes once we decide to look at it from the perspective of the persecuted. Maria Kobielska and Aleksandra Szczepan propose the term “testimionality” to describe a contemporary disposition of Poles to bear witness or give a testimony and define it as a complex situation which is heterogeneous, dynamic, comprising both human and non-human actors. However, what is important here is the question of how power relations shape testimoniality. The power structures inherent to majority–minority relations affect not only testimoniality and the way in which the war experience is framed from the perspective of the so-called “bystanders”, but also how testimoniality is performed by witnesses who come to testify on behalf of those who perpetrated violence against them. We should bear in mind the continuity of power relations which are inscribed in the testimonial situation and played out in this field, especially if it is the so-called bystanders who are called upon to speak about what happened and construct the situation for contemporary audiences.

Krijn Thijs: Yet, in this conceptualisation of “testimionality”, we obtain indeed some kind of new vocabulary to talk about witnessing; it does open a scope of different categories. From my perspective as an “old-fashioned” historian, I would be interested, however, in whether we can relate these various categories of witnesses to some kind of historical validity or source criticism. Various witnesses that we would like or not to call bystanders will always describe their position as most non-involved in the violence. Can we trust them? Can we trust one more than the other?

Maria Kobielska: Although the point of historical validity of the witnesses is, of course, of crucial importance, our focus was completely different. We did not want to investigate whether these people were telling the truth. We ask instead what they are doing now within the set of relations which we call memory culture or local memory culture. Our categories: crown, trustee, volunteer, outcast, contingent, summoned witnesses and testimonial gestures, performances, objects and words come from the present configurations of practices and subject positions of users of post-genocidal space.

Aleksandra Szczepan: We try to move the discussion about witnessing outside the discourse of morality because it has proven to be futile. Thus, instead of deciding who has the right to call themselves a witness, we rather ask: how do people in contemporary Poland position themselves as witnesses to the Shoah? Yet, we consider

ourselves implicated subjects, too: we are users of Polish memory culture and we have a vision of this culture and identity that we want to foster. This model entails speaking about the Shoah and Polish complicity and keeping the memory of the genocide. Therefore, our classification is in some way positive: we consider witnesses as people who are willing to tell the true story about the difficult past, even if in an incomplete and indirect way. In this sense, also our research might be considered “testimonial”: by researching sites of violence, we want to take upon the disposition of telling the story of the past.

Christina Morina: In a sense, this project is about unearthing things that you would not know about if you had not talked to these people: both in terms of the locations and of the things that happened. On the other hand, oral history interviews are not so much about what had happened, but rather document how people articulate their experiences and memories in the present. By the same token and bringing it back to historiography: the category of the bystander or rather *bystanding* – we should actually make the shift to a process-focused conceptualisation because the person-focused category has too many flaws – is not stable. Bystanding is a mode of social existence and thus an inherently unstable concept. Yet, it still allows us to grasp the complexity and changeability of the social experience of a person who can be acting as a perpetrator, suffering as a victim and behaving like a bystander in one and the same life. It is a category that constantly challenges perceptions about history and memory. For historians and memory activists, it remains tremendously challenging to find both, plausible explanations to what happened, as well as appropriate narratives, representations and platforms to disseminate their knowledge into society. So, our own work – including your interview work – has a profound impact on this complex interplay between history, historiography and memory.

5. How to get the Righteous right?

Roma Sendyka: The Righteous in Poland have always had bad luck – they have never been unconditionally accepted and valued and their actions from the past inevitably, for the last almost eight decades, cannot be read only within an ethical framework and beyond the political one. Even now, under democratic conditions and facing the time when all of them will perish, it seems like there is still no way to commemorate and thank these people in a non-political way. Used today as “screen object” in centralised discourse by populists, their biographies are utilised to boost Polish heroism/pride. On the other hand, anti-populists, trying not to join right-wing propaganda, opt for a quiet, calm almost self-effacing means of commemoration (like the unrealised monument of young wood near Polin Museum). Our research on clandestine abandoned sites confronted us with stories of the Righteous at least in two locations (Miechów and Radeckni-

ca). Locally, the enthusiasm to commemorate these heroes is visibly limited: evidently, they open up unresolved questions of participation in wartime violence, as well as remind about Jewish presence in the area. Is there a leftist and liberal way to openly and wholeheartedly commemorate the Righteous Among the Nations in Poland?

Katarzyna Bojarska: Tomasz Żukowski shows in his analysis that the motive of the Righteous is used to build a collective image of the entire Polish society. This happens by means of Polish culture. Yet, I would argue, there is no such thing as “Polish culture.” We talk about the so-called dominant discourse, but there is more to that and we should not exclude ourselves from it. Additionally, contrary to Tomasz Żukowski who says that he wishes for Polish culture to confront the actual experience of the Jewish people, I would claim that actually it does confront, let’s say, guilt, but the response is narcissistic and infantile. Yet, it is a response and an outcome of a confrontation. I am curious if the structure of using the Righteous in Polish culture to construct a self-image – by means of showing the Polish nation as a homogeneous group, marginalising violence against Jews and finally showing Jews as indebted to Polish people – is fixed throughout post-war until contemporary times. Or has it varied? If so, what would be the factors of change?

Tomasz Żukowski: I look at the culture from above and I am concerned about dominant groups; I try to show the social norm. This model is quite stable and repeats the same pattern. Moreover, if we start to try to tell this story in a different way, the model will overwhelm our narration and modify the meaning we would like to put into our message.

Roma Sendyka: What kind of majority are we talking about here? Is it a numerical majority? Or dominating culture because it dominates politically? Or dominating because of being in control of the symbolic order? The big surprise in research on non-sites of memory was observing how local populations, very open to right-wing and populist developments, are reluctant to accept the narrative about the Righteous that comes from Warsaw.

Tomasz Żukowski: I wanted to show how the discourse functioned. Perhaps it is my limitation that I am working in the library and I do not have the experience that you are talking about. I need to widen my field of observation.

Katarzyna Bojarska: And yet, can we have the right image of Polish and Jewish memory without any positive narrative about the Righteous?

Robert van der Laarse: We need to remember that the Righteous is not a neutral concept, but a very political one. In the light of current discussions on bystanding, it is remarkable that the two nations with the largest numbers of trees at Yad Vashem are Poland and the Netherlands. It would be interesting then to make a historical and cul-

tural comparison between the Dutch and Polish situation regarding the Righteous. In the Netherlands, today the whole notion is actually hardly known or probably “forgotten.” The Dutch discussion about the war is always about “why we did not help the Jews enough.” Instead of being proud of such a large number of people who helped Jews in hiding or escapes, there is a general shame of not having been able to save them from the Nazis. In addition, what I find fascinating is how different this category is perceived in Poland (or from another angle, in France, where the Righteous are also publicly honoured). So, there is, in my view, really a big difference in the way we treat the notion of Righteous, just like that of bystander and which is probably closely related to the way national identities and self-images are expressed in narratives of occupation and victimhood.

Zuzanna Dziuban: Thinking about Poland, I would argue that, before we start drawing from positive examples for wartime attitudes and deeds, we should face it critically, have our critical moment. From my point of view, this has not happened yet: in the last 75 years, every possibility to truly critically address Polish positionality during the war has been domesticated, covered over with the redemptory discourse of trauma, covered over with the positive narrative of the Righteous Among the Nations and the exceptional scale of altruism on the part of Polish helpers, often evoked to hide the scope of complicity of Poles in the genocidal violence against Jews. This pertains also to the level of discursive and epistemological constructions perpetuated by scholars. The ethnographic approach, going into the field, certainly has the ability to unsettle this dominant frame, but this is also limited if we listen exclusively to Polish testimonies and only one perspective on the events. I probably spent too much time in the archives to be optimistic. There is still a lot of critical work to be done, as well as on our analytical categories.

Erica Lehrer: Thinking about the problem of representing the Righteous from a curatorial point of view, I have seen quite a few exhibitions on this subject and I have thought about what it would take to make a good exhibition about righteousness, not only, but especially in Poland. There are a few issues: one is that we use “righteous” as a sort of shorthand; we assume that we know what we are talking about when we say this word. However, we do not really take time to unpack the concept at all. We need to understand the range of ideas and myths that people – audiences who come to see an exhibition – may already have in their heads about righteousness. Yad Vashem (Israel’s official Holocaust memorial institution) has a strict definition of what it takes for an individual to be formally recognised by the Israeli state as Righteous Among the Nations. However, their criteria are, I think, not well known to most people, who do not have any idea, for instance, that one cannot have received any compensation for the help that one provided to Jews. The historical reality, however, does not even support Yad Vashem’s

category as entirely plausible. Even very noble people who hid Jews at great risk still needed funds to feed these people and that must have, at times, come from the people themselves. How can we know that all the resources that a given Jew in hiding had to offer their rescuer went strictly for their own upkeep? In addition, of course, the way the term is used in the vernacular, for people who perhaps in any way at any time helped a Jewish person, well then it gets extremely complicated. Could we do an exhibition where we actually show the complexity through real, specific, lived stories? What was the experience of someone who hid or helped a Jew? Is this not as complicated a category as “bystander”? Could bystanders help someone and also sexually assault them? Could they help someone and extort all the money from them? Many things happened, there was a broad spectrum of behaviour and these are complex stories. Michał Bilewicz says that, in the case of the Righteous in Poland, we should emphasise their *rarity*. The way this phenomenon is curated in contemporary Poland makes it seem as if just about everybody was righteous. In addition, in allowing this kind of thinking to be perpetuated, we lose out on the real pedagogical potential of helping people understand just how brave these very *few* people were. Instead, the idea of the Righteous is being used in Poland as a tool for clearing the national conscience, to say “We were good.” It would be much more useful, instead, to say: “It was really incredibly difficult to be a hero in this kind of situation.” This would be a completely different story. However, I think it would be one worth telling, as well as determining how to tell this story well.

6. Commemoration and education

Christina Morina: I assume that the visits of Yahad – In Unum or Rabbinical Commission is quite an exceptional event for these small communities: when you go there and talk to people about stories that, in their majority, have long been hidden and not talked about, I am curious to know how you reflect in your team on the effects that your work has on the local cultural memory and the social landscape of the places you visit. Do you think that your work has the potential to shift people’s assumptions about complicity and, in a broader sense, change historical consciousness?

Michał Chojak: The main goal of our work is to establish facts. In Poland, we are lucky to have a lot of archival sources: depositions of survivors, German documents etc., but the further you go to the East, the fewer archives you will find. Therefore, our questions are about facts: where did it happen, how, who were the actors involved in the killing? We do not ask questions about the perceptions of the event because these questions might be complicated for some people to answer. They do not expect these kinds of questions, as, for many of them, it is the first time that they speak about those events and, especially in former Soviet territories, people are not used to

being asked what they think about a historical event and they are not really prepared to answer this kind of question. However, we deeply encourage researchers to study testimonies recorded by Yahad – In Unum because these answers are there: even if the question were not asked, one may find information about the witnesses’ perceptions of the event, of the place, of the impact it has had on their collective memory.

Agnieszka Nieradko: Our approach is similar. When visiting a place, we are mainly interested in finding the “hole in the ground”, meaning the grave. We do come back to those sites and people, we do not focus, however, on their condition of being a witness. What is striking for me is the fact that many witnesses, with whom we speak, are now elderly people, living either on their own or close to their families and their stories are often disregarded and ignored by the next generations. The descendants of the witnesses are surprised to see that somebody wants to talk to their grandmother or grandfather and that, in fact, what he or she says matters. The so-called local people all know about those sites; however this memory is marginalised.

Katarzyna Bojarska: How do you get in touch with the representatives of the community? Do you involve the community in any way? What, in your opinion, do you bring to the people who live there?

Agnieszka Nieradko: Whenever someone contacts us about a place, a grave she or he knows about – we react. We try to focus on people who contacted us with the information about the site, these being either witnesses themselves or their families or local historians or people interested in their local history who have been collecting stories for years and now they feel there is space and time to share. We engage local authorities only at the stage of establishing memorials or some more serious undertakings, not while just investigating and looking for witnesses. Those who open the door for us are just individual people and they are our guides. Additionally, we must realise that people we meet now were children at the time of the events, so not only have we to deal with the information they share with us, but also we have to face their childhood trauma, since very often, when talking about the events they witnessed, they focus on themselves. As children, they saw and heard things so powerful that probably, at some point, it influenced their entire life. Moreover, their memories are often general and imprecise, after 70 years everything at the site turns out to be different, greater from what they remembered. I am not sure what we give them; I do not think we give them much, because we just want to listen to the story and we leave. Quite often children or grandchildren call us after the visit to tell us it was too much for them.

Adam Musiał: Have the initiatives you have been undertaking at the grass-roots level had any effect in education. Have they had any effect in perpetuating the memory of

these places? Has anything changed in carrying on the memory of these places in order to turn these non-sites of memory into sites of memory? I think this needs grass-roots local initiatives, ideally of teachers, educators, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where the dominant model of national identity is based on ethnicity, in order to turn these non-sites of memory into places of our common memory.

Agnieszka Nieradko: From my experience, a site of non-memory becomes a site of memory only after erecting a three-dimensional object. If there is nothing around which we can gather or where we can leave candles, flowers or a stone, this site does not exist in the local memory. It does exist only for individual people who decide to remember. In places where we have succeeded in commemorating mass graves, all sites are being taken care of by the local schools. Moreover, local inhabitants visit these sites on November 1, All Saints Day. Yet, these forms of organised memory happen only if there is some material sign of a site. This is why we came up with the idea of the wooden matzevot and have, so far, erected around fifty of them, mainly in eastern Poland. As it turned out, even a piece of wood stuck in the ground makes a difference for people. For example, in the tiny village of Adampol, near Sobibór, where a labour camp for Jews was located and where 800 victims perished, two years ago, we managed to put up a wooden matzeva in the forest where one of the mass graves is located. A year later, one of my colleagues visited Adampol again to collect some testimonies and he was approached by a local woman who told him that she would lead him to the Jewish cross in the forest – she meant our matzeva. Since a matzeva is made of wood, for the woman the connotation was clear. It is truly a matter of leaving a marker with an inscription – the matzevot have an inscription saying “Here rest Jews of blessed memory murdered during the Holocaust” – to add the site the gravity. So, if we want the memory to be transmitted to further generations, we need to think of something that would be understandable for the local people: where you can place a candle or say a prayer.

Christina Morina: I would encourage us all to think about the assumptions that we (often implicitly) share. I believe that cultivating and commemorating those sites will do something good – in the best case, it will prevent such social violence from happening again. We should, however, ask ourselves what kind of non-site memory activism we wish to pursue and inspire and how we can provide education through explanation and analyses rather than “merely” mourning and emotional engagement. We need to debate how these sites can serve as open spaces in which actual historical knowledge about what and why things happened is being provided so we can have some hope that people will think for themselves and thus learn or unlearn certain types of behaviour for their times. I think enlightenment should be our goal.

Jonathan Webber: Yet, it is a bit unfortunate that, as Agnieszka Nieradko mentioned, the idea of these memorials is that Poles, not Jews, are to remember Jewish losses. Jews chose not to remember their losses and did not make a very strong effort to memorialise mass graves in the years after 1945. I am thinking of the British who, after World War I, established what later became known as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; it is a massive project, and to this day continues to maintain war graves at 23,000 locations in 150 countries, commemorating the dead in individual named graves or, if impractical, on a memorial. I cannot understand why, after World War II, the Jewish authorities did not establish a Holocaust graves commission and have not focused until today on memorialising all these places properly and correctly.

Zuzanna Dziuban: This is not necessarily the case. There was a special commission established as early as 1944 by the Jewish community, which was organising itself at the time and searches for graves and exhumations were undertaken. Additionally, the Red Cross carried out exhumations in the immediate post-war period. I think it is important to bear in mind that this took place in a specific political situation that, amongst others, led to the centralisation of exhumation policies and politics in the post-war period in Poland, which effectively prevented the Jewish community from carrying out those exhumations by themselves. However, there were many local and bottom-up initiatives aimed at collecting human remains from memorial sites, which were not transformed into memorial sites at the time, at burying ashes at Jewish cemeteries or bringing them for burial to Israel.

Robert van der Laarse: For a long time, in many countries, also in the Netherlands, orthodox Jewish communities did not even like to visit the sites of massacre. Thus, the Dutch chief rabbis stood by the position: “If you want to remember, do it within your own circles.” Nowadays, since the 1990s, in contrast, there are lots of involvement of Jewish communities and activists in “Holocaust” camp memorial sites. Yet, the main argument against the claim about Jewish negligence regarding memorialisation is the fact that, in the years 1945-1948, there was no State of Israel that could represent Jewish people. Moreover, there is the question if Israel does represent all the Jewish victims of the Holocaust comparable to how other countries, like Britain or France, are commemorating their war victims. Are we allowed to politicise them as Jewish victims, knowing that, as citizens of European countries, they were killed for being Jews according to Nazi laws. Thus, on the one hand, we need to be very careful in taking up such ethnic kinds of categorisations in memory work, while on the other, we certainly have the task to avoid making everyone the same kind of victim.

Agnieszka Nieradko: The Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, often says that the Polish-Jewish relationship, including the memory of the Holocaust, was in the

fridge for 50 years. So now we are taking this thing out of the fridge and we have to deal with it. It is astonishing and frustrating that it could have been done years ago. Halacha, meaning the Jewish law, forbids moving the dead. However, even if we could conduct invasive research of grave-sites, I do not think it would be of any help. In our team, we think that it is not only about religion – the dead who we are looking for right now should stay where they are. Just after the War, there was an idea about moving all the victims from the outside of the camps to create, in the four corners of Poland, four huge memorial sites. This idea and the one of moving bodies to Jewish cemeteries are not good from the memory point of view. Once again, Jews would turn out not to be Polish enough to stay in the places where they lived and where they died. They should stay where they are buried, for the sake of history and memory which is not in a very good condition anyway.

Zuzanna Dziuban: I am thinking about the performance *Akurat tędy szliśmy* (*We Walked Just This Way*) by Wojtek Ziemilski, produced by Bryce Lease. This was a performance without assigned roles; however, its participants were asked to drag miniature trucks with ashes, *Truposznica* – a toy which is a replica of a real wartime truck – across the bridge that connected Kraków’s Kazimierz with the ghetto during the war. What kind of subject position were they performing then? The question about positionalities, which we adopt or perform, cuts across a lot of contemporary memorial practices, performances and games. Moreover, we also assume specific subject positions in our research.

Bryce Lease: We talked about the truck as a vehicle of storytelling: stories that arise out of this object. It was also a reminder of the work of memory: walking, carrying, dragging behind – the idea that memory is something always behind our back, just behind us though separated by a kind of gap. I think you can theorise this gap along the lines of the copy itself. So, it was not about identifying our role in relationship to *Truposznica*, but rather about physicalising a certain kind of memory work.

Matilda Mroz: I am interested in the audience for your performance, since we have been discussing for whom we do this commemorative work. How were people relating to this procession? Did they join in or rather stop and stare at you? What were the responses from people watching?

Bryce Lease: Firstly, there were not enough trucks for all the participants in the end and some people felt upset about the fact that, even if they were walking with us, they were not pulling a truck so they were not fully participating. Secondly, we were hoping – since it was a Saturday afternoon – that people would be walking on the streets, coming into town, going shopping etc. Indeed, we did see quite a lot of people. The presence of the police stopping the traffic also made us visible in a completely

different way. However, what made us the most visible was the sound; the noise that was produced drew people onto the streets. A number of people asked if this was a protest. I think it was successful because Holocaust commemoration, especially in Kraków, tends to be overdetermined, so the fact that people did not know what we were doing and had to ask us – especially city residents who were accustomed to certain types of commemorative practices – that meant that we broke the predictable framework and actually engaged the public in a new way.

Katarzyna Bojarska: For a long time, we were thinking that the only thing that would work in the Holocaust pedagogy was telling people the truth about what had happened. We believed that the knowledge would transform their ethical and political stand. Now we know this strategy has failed or partially failed. So, we desperately need different forms of pedagogy, ones which would be open to ambivalence and ones which would include play. Additionally, the performance presented may be interpreted as both: a solemn walk across the bridge, but also a playful practice, in a very positive, productive sense.

Bryce Lease: At the beginning, I was very resistant to this idea and determined not to understand *Truposznica* as a toy. However, when I was confronted by a child who absolutely understood it as a toy, I realised that I could not exclude that form of identification as well.

Zuzanna Dziuban: In a sense, this logic was absent from the game experiment performed with school kids in Radecznicza by Tomasz Majkowski and Katarzyna Suszkiewicz. I loved the fact that Tomasz and Katarzyna asked students to design a game and not to perform certain pre-assigned positionalities.

Bryce Lease: I wonder about this game: can you win it? In a standard Hollywood narrative structure about the Holocaust, we focus on survival rather than on death, so I am curious about whether the game reproduces the focus on survival as the act of commemoration in which the ones who win are the ones who live.

Tomasz Majkowski: Perhaps, the major problem with inexperienced board game designers is that they, of course, start thinking about a game in terms of winning and losing. Luckily, in all groups we had in Radecznicza, students actually began to see problems in it. Especially in one game, they started to feel uneasy with the fact that there is a winner, so there is one survivor, but their gains are the costs of other people playing, since the major mechanics of the game was to push people out of hiding places to take their place. So, there was an opportunity for winning, but it was already problematised. It is easy to problematise it in a board game because you play it with living people. So, when you win, you actually see these people who lost. So, you start thinking that maybe you can come up with an alternative solution. There are also

board games that force you to cooperate, so everybody wins or everybody loses.

Katarzyna Suszkiewicz: It was the most important, but also the most challenging part of the project to create mechanics in which we would not give them simple answers or simple solutions, like winning meaning survival.

Krijn Thijs: Tomasz Majkowski said they framed the field for the participants of the game. Did it also include various positions people could have taken in the conflict? Or did young people in Radeznica themselves come up with the classical roles from the triangle of bystanders, victims and perpetrators? Was the question of with whom you identify important? For us, who are working with non-professionals (respondents, witnesses), it is important to know how far our impact extended on the people we work with. Do they deliver what we are expecting, to please us as Holocaust researchers? Do they get this kind of modus in memory work? Is there any evidence of not abiding by these rules or expectations in the context of the game in Radeznica? Maybe a different attitude prevails outside the room, amongst friends, with their family? The Holocaust is so interesting because it is sitting on a taboo, so it is impossible to make a “free” game of this and therefore illegal games are aiming at this taboo. Where are the borders of our discourse? Can we research on rejecting our frame of expectations?

Tomasz Majkowski: We decided to cut the workshop in half and reveal to the students that they have to reconnect already designed games to the topic of the Holocaust. First, we tried to push them in some other directions because we suspected that, if we had revealed our goal at the very beginning, that we expected from them to deal with the subject of the Shoah, they would have abandoned the local context completely and have gone with some mainstream imaginary of a death camp. This is why we decided to steer that topic away in the first part of the workshop and then see how and to what they can reconnect it afterwards.

Of course, they were unable to completely escape the framework of a board game, since this form has certain expectations and rules. They had only several hours to learn about the basics of board game designing which is not that easy at all. We actually designed sets of elements in a way that provoked them to go with a certain design direction just to facilitate it, so they would be able to produce something they believed they produced themselves. Our idea was to guide their work through elements and through mentorship by giving them as many tools as possible in such a short notice.

Katarzyna Suszkiewicz: Radeznica is a very peculiar example and people there know our team to some extent and know why we are there and that we are connected to the sites of the Holocaust. Before the workshop, we gave a description of it to the parents so they knew what the workshop would be about and they had to give their

consent. Therefore, it could have been easily sensed by students what the workshop would be about. This is why we set back to move them away from this topic. However, my presentation during the workshop was explicit about the aim of it. I said that we came there to strengthen their memory about the sites of the Holocaust. So, it was indeed very easy to please us in the survey afterwards, because they knew exactly what we expected from them. Another challenge for this project was the fact that there was no follow-up possible, as in many projects like this. Students are now in different high schools and it would be very difficult to track them. Yet, maybe by setting this scenario and guidelines for similar projects, it will be possible to do these follow-ups in different grades.

Karina Jarzyńska: As an observer, I noticed a sense of pride in students when they were told that their projects would become a part of the school library and could be used in the future. Additionally, the pride they gained from this experience might be something that would encourage them to pass on this engagement.

Roma Sendyka: I was observing this experiment from a very early stage and it was our goal to find a way to design a responsible collaborative project that would not be predictable. Hence, the idea of cooperating with the game studies department emerged. I joined the workshop in Radeznica only on the second day. The team made the students create the game, based on understanding of universal experiences of seeking something or fleeing from something; the game design forced the participant to take a meta-position, to observe processes, so the workshop put them in the situation of a sociologist who tries to understand certain practices, only in the last move being asked about what will happen to this practice if a framework of violence would encompass it. This is a proposition which is already detached from identification. Observing the experiment made me think that perhaps teaching about the Holocaust should not be about explaining *everything* (from Wannsee to Judenjagd) – but rather teaching *something*: finding the special moment that would “change gears”, trigger attention and engagement. Let me give you an example: one group of students designed a game, based on chasing and hiding. Basically, the scenario was based on moving pawns in different colours so they could go from one place to another. Then the players could raise the stakes: your task is to take all pawns in a certain colour to the final position. Taking one pawn was not that difficult, but taking two pawns was almost impossible. They designed the game in such a way on day one; on day two after a lecture, they had to think whether the Holocaust scenario could be placed in the reality they created. One of them said: “With family, it would be almost impossible to escape and save all.” Response of the rest of the group suggested this special educational condition of “understanding *something*” – that important, key “something” that changes your whole attitude to the issue.

Erica Lehrer: This is a really important intervention, because it ends the discussion of “who do you identify with?” In the game, you are forced to shift around and identify with everyone. Not only do you have to figure out how to win, but you also have to figure out how to frustrate others’ winning. It is not only about how to escape, but also how to stop people from escaping.

Katarzyna Suszkiewicz: It was a memorable moment when the students started connecting the ideas of hideouts with the topography of Radecznica, when they started actually mentioning places which were located on the map of the eyewitness from Radecznica, Stanisław Zybala.

Karina Jarzyńska: The workshop triggered students’ memory of stories that they knew from their grandparents about what happened during the War and provided an opportunity for sharing them with each other.

Roma Sendyka: At this moment, they realised that the Holocaust happened in that area. To understand that, they came with the knowledge from the area. That is what is at stake in such an experiment.

Conclusions

The uncommemorated sites of violence, the non-sites of memory, are objects of weak ontology. Should we stabilise them? Any essentialising in this context seems counterproductive and leads to less knowledge about the object in question. In our project, we strived to escape essentialisation, privileging work through relations and processes. We struggled with unstable ontologies and epistemologies, trying to explain uncommemorated sites of trauma beyond the division between semiotic (uncommunicable muted memory) and symbolic (cultural, communicative memory). The work demanded tools that would access what is not spoken of, what is communicated through movements, performances, actions, gestures, utterances. What is contained by different archives: those official, institutionalised, but also those grass-roots, private, unprofessional; those that can be attributed to nature, to materialities. We tended to think about non-sites of memory in terms of legacy rather than heritage, as Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett differentiates the concepts. Legacy suggests an inheritance not necessarily welcomed, something that befalls the successor. Yet, *legatus* – is the one who is sent to take an office, therefore it is a job – a job of facing the difficult past, to be taken on. However, if somebody is sent, there is a power centre or the privileged position; therefore, the power or even violence are inevitably inscribed in the notion of legacy. We might need a completely new vocabulary to describe what we are entering when we are

challenged by an uncommemorated site, a vocabulary that will abandon terms like “loss” or “absence” and highlight “presence”. It was the focus on what is still there, on “critical presence” that linked our debates on post-violence, post-Holocaust topographies.

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