

Vernacular historical practices on Holocaust non-sites of memory in Poland

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Abstract

The approach employed by memory activists to sites of memory often involves historical practices. This paper presents the results of the examination of historical practices undertaken in locations of Holocaust violence during World War II and the disposal of victims' remains that were not memorialised properly according to local residents or other groups with an interest in the sites' past. The analysed practices were observed in the course of field research in various locations in Poland. The goal of the research was to describe these practices, discuss their critical potential, and indicate their distinct features as activities pertaining to contested sites of memory. A central tool for approaching this task is found in concepts of "non-site of memory" and "vernacular historian" as introduced to the debate by Claude Lanzmann and Lyle Dick. As a result, the article presents the cases of four vernacular historians whose practices are experimental combinations of the components of the work of professional historians and ways of working conditioned by local cultural environments, individual experience and commitment to communal life. Although vernacular history is sometimes considered of little value by academic historians, the research shows that the practices in question have the potential to produce new, socially relevant knowledge. Two distinct features of vernacular historical practices in non-sites of memory were observed: these unmarked sites of burial attract activists and prompt them to undertake historical practices; vernacular historians of these locations often undertake unconventional, sometimes experimental activities..

Key Words

contested sites of memory, historical practices, Holocaust, non-site of memory, Polish memory cultures, vernacular history

Introduction

Memory activists undertake historical practices at the sites of memory. In the article I present the results of the examination of historical practices committed in locations of Holocaust violence during WWII and the disposal of victims' remains that were not memorialised properly according to local residents or other groups with an interest in the sites' past. The team from the Research Centre for Memory Cultures (Jagiellonian University), which investigates the non-sites of memory, observed these practices in the course of field study in various locations in Poland: Radecznicza in the Lublin Voivodeship, the area of Miechów near Kraków, Bielcza and Borzęcin in Lesser Poland Voivodeship. Our methods include visits to non-sites of memory and sites of memory in the area, non-directive

interviews with local residents and memory activists, gathering data on the local memory discourse (literature, historical writing, memoirs, museum exhibitions, social archives, local press, vernacular art). The goal of my analysis is to describe these practices, discuss their critical potential, and indicate their distinct features as activities pertaining to contested sites of memory. I found a central instrument for approaching this task in concepts of "non-site of memory" and "vernacular historian" as introduced to the debate by Claude Lanzmann (and further elaborated by Roma Sendyka) (Lanzmann 1990; Sendyka 2016) and Lyle Dick (Dick 2010a, 2010b, 2013). The term 'non-site of memory' is a critical extension of Pierre Nora's sites of memory and refers to sites of violence whose forms of commemoration are questioned by local residents or other groups with an interest in the sites'

past¹. “Vernacular historian” is a notion that Lyle Dick uses to describe the practices of Canadian local historians who commit themselves to their communities and treat historical activities as a means to strengthen its identity and support the appreciation of its problems (Dick 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Devine 2016, 2017). As a result, I present the cases of four vernacular historians whose activities were entangled with sites of genocidal violence against Jewish Poles and Roma. Their practices are experimental combinations of the components of the research activities of professional historians and ways of approaching sites of memory conditioned by local cultural environments, individual experience and commitment to communal life. Although vernacular history is sometimes considered of little value by academic historians, the research shows that the practices in question have the potential to produce new, socially relevant knowledge. I identify two distinct features of vernacular historical practices in non-sites of memory: these unmarked sites of burial attract activists and prompt them to undertake historical practices; vernacular historians of these locations often undertake unconventional, sometimes experimental activities. The paper is one of the results of an interdisciplinary research project dedicated to the sites that witnessed violent events, which was conducted in the years 2016–2020 in Poland. A team of researchers analysed locations associated with violence perpetrated against Jews, Roma, and Ukrainians during and shortly after World War II (as a control case, the team also examined sites of violence against Germans and Poles).

Local historical practices

In 2010, Stanisław Rozwar Zybała (Szczepan et al. 2020) finished a typed manuscript of his book *The Children of Radechnica* (Dzieci Radechnicy). Zybała was a memory activist from Radechnica, a village in the Roztocze Hills in South East Poland, whose Jewish inhabitants were murdered in the Holocaust (Skibińska 2018).² In his book, Zybała reconstructs the fate of the young inhabitants of his village, his peers from the World War II period: their suffering brought about by the armed conflict and occu-

pation, the everyday struggles, the clandestine schooling, the death of Jewish children in the Holocaust, and the imitation of adults in forming a child’s resistance movement. Zybała wrote a dedication on the book’s closing pages:

Why did I write *The Children of Radechnica*? I did it because a lot had been written about the adults; there were even monuments erected [...] I scribbled down this *memoirial* for all the children of Radechnica – who went through the cruelties of war and experienced the joy of singing in the pastures, by the cabins and on camps – and for those who have been denied Kaddish. I will write down a funeral fragment from the prayer El Male Rachamin (S. Zybała 2010).

In this quote, the word “memoirial” catches the attention of the reader – the Polish word being “wspominnik”, a quasi-diminutive neologism, fusing the words for recollection (“wspomnienia”) and monument (“pomnik”). This linguistic invention might seem somewhat superfluous since the notion of “memorial” (pomnik) itself gathers several connotations referring to the preservation of personal or collective memory by means of various articulations. It emphasizes that the book is to be a recollection, a work about past events that the author was party to, as well as a memorial – a lasting commemoration in place of “stony signs”. In the last sentence, Zybała dedicated his work to the Jewish victims bereft of graves, and wrote the words of a Jewish prayer for the dead, recreating an element of the funeral ceremony and transforming the book into a gravestone for the victims of the Holocaust. Zybała presented his manuscript as a book on Radechnica’s children’s war sufferings in general (both Christian and Jewish); however in a number of passages he addressed the difference in the fate of Jews and non-Jews under Nazi rule.

And, indeed, the book is structured by Zybała’s recollections, complemented by accounts of other Radechnica residents, recorded by Zybała. The credibility of these testimonies – open to question after all, since there are few other sources that would allow for their corroboration – is strengthened by the presence of an “audiography” at the end of the book. The audiography, placed just before the bibliography, is a table of the oral records used by the author, including bios and photographs of the speakers (S.

1 Sendyka describes non-sites of memory in the following way: “The basic indicator is lack of information (altogether or of proper, founded information), of material forms of commemoration (plaques, monuments, museums), and of reparations (any official designation of the scope of the territory in question). Non-sites of memory also have in common the past or continued presence of human remains (bodies of deceased persons) that has not been neutralized by funerary rites. These sites do not, meanwhile, share physical characteristics: they may be extensive or minute, urban or rural, though they are often characterized by some variety of physical blending of the organic order (human remains, plants, animals) and to the inorganic order (ruins, new construction). The victims who should be commemorated on such sites typically have a collective identity (usually ethnic) distinct from the society currently living in the area, whose self-conception is threatened by the occurrence of the non-site of memory. Such localities are transformed, manipulated, neglected, or contested in some other way (often devastated or littered), the resultant forsaking of memorialization leading to ethnically problematic revitalization that draws criticism” (Sendyka 2016, 700).

2 Radechnica is a small village in Roztocze, a region in eastern Poland in Zamość County with approx. 920 inhabitants. In World War II, its small Jewish community was resettled in a ghetto in Szczepierzyn. A few Jews in hiding were denounced and executed. A strong underground movement was connected with the local Bernardine abbey, where local partisans often took shelter and where, after the war, a hospital for the mentally ill was built. In the last decade, the church in the abbey became a resting place for the exhumed bodies of the soldiers of the right-wing anticommunist underground formations. The site was researched in the project by Maria Kobielska, Roma Sendyka, Aleksandra Szczepan and Aleksandra Janus, Jacek Małczyński, Karina Jarzyńska, Tomasz Majkowski and Katarzyna Suszkiewicz.

Zybała 2010). An additional means meant to strengthen readers' trust in the veracity of the account is a rather surprising image positioned after the bibliography (Fig. 1).

Page 79 of the manuscript features a picture, a scan of a photograph of Zybała taken in semi-profile, with a frame and background typical for portrait photos in a style used in ID documents. The photograph itself is small and placed in the very centre of the image, the greater part being taken up by the print of the palm that is keeping the photo on the scanner's glass. In the top-left corner of the page there is the word "Autopsy". It would appear that the presence of the palm print has not resulted from the author's clumsiness but is intentional – other photos included in the book have been edited conventionally. Zybała signed his books with the name "Stanisław Rozwar Zybała", where the added word "Rozwar" means, as he explains, "being separated from a piece of himself." (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz 2019) Immediately after the war, whilst he worked as a carpenter, Zybała lost a part of his thumb and index finger of his right hand, but was able later on to use the fingers nonetheless when writing by hand or on a typewriter (Zybała M 2019). He made his disability a feature of his identity and here, using the scanner, he has developed his disability into a signature. Zybała also added his own eye-witnessed "autopsy" to the table of sources, after the audiography and bibliography. He places somewhat excessive emphasis here by using two

indexical signs (the copy of the photograph and the palm print.) This addition, as with the audiography, seems an unusual, exaggerated and a simple imitative practice but it also makes a point, transforming the standard procedures of the professional historian along the way. Zybała's intention was to build up the impression of a reliable, credible book that would prolong and broaden the impact of local knowledge contained within it.

Following the classic rhetorical topos, Zybała's "The Children of Radechnica" was meant to be a monument to the young Polish and Jewish residents of the village, a permanent record of their experiences, one that would be circulated around the local culture and the country as a whole. It might seem that Zybała sought to ensure the right effect by deploying the historian's toolbox of techniques, both in standard and innovative ways. Zybała's sometimes surprising, sometimes ham-fisted and, at times, original historical techniques may be his own way of trying to raise the act of commemoration to the rank and credibility of an academic discipline. In any case, they are a handy way of transforming information passed on in private conversations among neighbours into public knowledge to be accessed nationwide. The most basic purpose was for him to convey knowledge of the non-sites of memory – a knowledge that, as Zybała was convinced, needed both care and development into stable forms of commemoration.

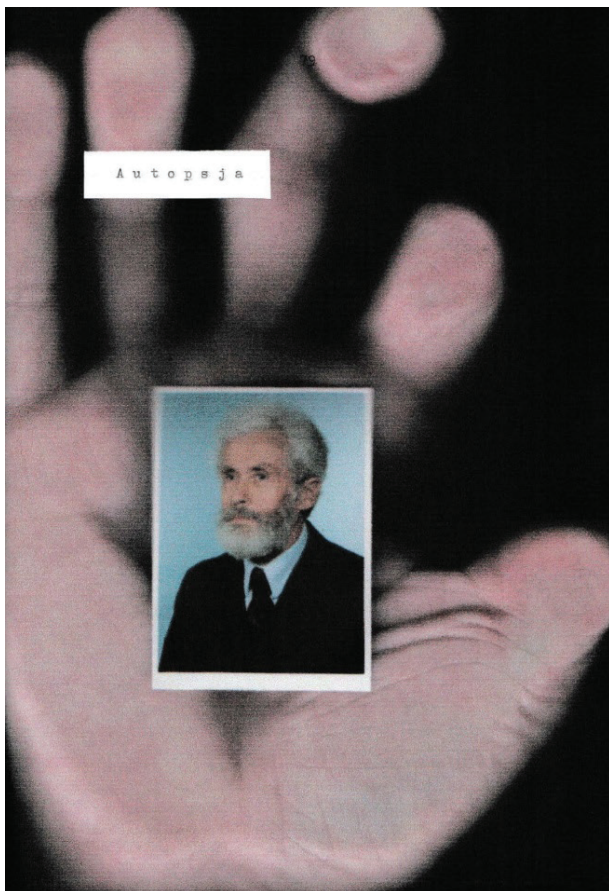


Figure 1. "Autopsy". S. Zybała, "Dzieci Radechnicy", manuscript, p. 79.

Uncritical and ineffective?

In the course of research on non-sites of memory in Poland, our team met many people like Stanisław Zybała. He mentioned victims "who have been denied Kaddish", Jewish children whose remains are buried in unmarked locations. These kind of sites – locations of genocidal violence and disposal of victims' remains which were not memorialised properly according to local residents – were the main objectives of our research. Our research is based on the assumption that these sites are important components of local memory cultures: unburied bodies affect activities of people living in the area and trigger memory practices. We describe them as non-sites of memory following Claude Lanzmann's refiguration of Pierre Nora's term (Lanzmann 1990; Sendyka 2015, 2016, 2017a). The field work on non-sites of memory referring to genocidal violence in the 1930's and 40's was conducted in various locations in Poland in 2016-2018. We encounter local activists participating in historical practices pertaining to these locations who presented themselves as hysterics, as commune chroniclers, and as collectors (Jarzyńska and Muchowski 2017a; Szczepan, Pośluszny 2020). We added the term explorer (Szczepan, Pośluszny 2020) – and also "vernacular historian" which applied to all. In this article, I discuss these figures and the critical potential of the work undertaken by each of them, as well as indicating the distinctive features of vernacular historical practices pertaining to non-sites of memory. By "critical" I mean practices

which are self-reflexive, question the habitual patterns of action and produce a socially relevant knowledge.

The vernacular history is not usually a subject of debate among professional historians.. Professional and vernacular historians may share archives, very occasionally they may share methods, ideas and dictionaries but they do not share the stage at public debate, or review each other's papers. Two different kinds of knowledge have grown up in parallel – professional and local. This division is connected to the conviction of professional historians that local historians – like local artisans (Lehrer, Sendyka 2019) – are incompetent and their work of little value according to the yardsticks of professional discourse (Wiszewski 2008; Smasonowicz 1987). In a rare case of a professional historian even referring to vernacular historical writing, Bartłomiej Krupa read over a hundred books on the history of local Jewish communities in Poland and stated that this writing was subjected to unchanging rules since the 1980s, when it emerged as an articulation of - on the one hand - a surge of interest in the history of Polish-Jewish relations after the release of Claude Lanzmann's movie *Shoah*; on the other – the career of “small homelands” literature celebrating the imaginary multiculturalism of old Poland. He criticized this writing for its naïve acceptance of nostalgic myths of the uniqueness and charm of Jewish communities (Krupa 2012). This, he claimed, leads to an orientalisng perspective on Jewish inhabitants and an objectification of their suffering, the Holocaust being in these local writings merely a pretext for a sentimental narrative. The mythologizing image of picturesque shtetls collaborates with the disinclination – issuing from local power relations – to take on topics with a painful provenance, resulting in a censored narrative effectively veiling anti-Jewish violence (Krupa 2012).

One of the goals of this text is to reveal the perceptive and critically sharp vernacular practices as we have actually encountered them, allowing one to question the assumption that vernacular historians are clumsy, imperceptive, ineffective and unoriginal in comparison with professional historiographers.

The hysteric

Andrzej Pałka called himself a “hysteric”, playing off the homonymic quality of “hysteric” and “historian”. He is a retired railwayman, an enthusiast of the local history of Charsznica Commune in Miechów County, Lesser Poland, whose Jewish communities were liquidated in the Holocaust (Libionka 2018).³ As he himself explained, a hysteric differs from a historian in that the former exhibits *excessive* interest in the past, using time and resources that would be better spent elsewhere. Pałka emphasizes

that hysterics do not possess the erudition of the professional, yet they are more inclined to devote a lot of time to conversations with neighbours about the past and investigations of their cellars and attics – in the hunt for potential sources. And neighbours are more inclined to speak freely to trusted neighbours about their experiences, to pass on stories they have heard and to show them their mementoes. Whereas someone from the outside asking questions about the past, will anyway be directed to the local hysteric. “All roads lead to Andrzej,” the one who best knows the area and is also in close touch with the outside world in matters concerning history (Jarzyńska and Muchowski 2017a, 2017b).

In Pałka's opinion, the most important historical practices that he employs are collecting historical records and verifying the information obtained about the past by comparing different sources. According to the man, historical knowledge built on the basis of meticulous source comparisons is to question local myths, simplifications and stereotypes, especially those concerning the Jewish inhabitants of Miechów County. In our conversations, Pałka suggested that when he worked with the heritage of his community his loyalty had its limits. In contentious matters, he took the side of reliable historical knowledge or of another individual situated outside the community who needed his support. It seems that by calling himself a hysteric, Pałka also suggested that his practices differ from the social norm and his actions exposed him to the risk of being marginalized in his own community (Jarzyńska and Muchowski 2017b).

The commune's chronicler

We have already met Stanisław Zybala (died in 2014), the local librarian who played the role of unofficial “Commune Chronicler” for Radecznica. He himself used this term in his texts and the inhabitants of the area use it too. In his work, as befits his title, Zybala did not undertake the *explanation* of history. He noted down history chronologically, checking lists of participants, registering effects – but rarely commenting on them. In the classical distinction of Benedetto Croce a chronicle is a chronologically ordered set of historical facts, whereas history combines them into meaningful configurations – history explains them and provides them with meaning (Danto 1968; Topolski 1976).

A key element of his work as Chronicler was to produce, secure and pass on vernacular knowledge about non-sites, which for him were a key element of local memory (Szczepan et al. 2020). In his texts, Zybala took on the complicated task of naming the locations where human remains of Holocaust victims were hidden under

3 The Miechów area was researched by Karina Jarzyńska i Jakub Muchowski with cooperation of Aleksandra Szczepan and Roma Sendyka. The town is located in Małopolska (Lesser Poland) Voivodship, has app. 12000 inhabitants. During the war, Jewish inhabitants were resettled to the ghetto, and murdered in death camps. In the area there is also a major killing site from 1942, i.e. Chodówki forest, with 600-700 victims buried in the forest. For the discussion of local non-sites of memory see Jarzyńska, Muchowski 2020.

the soil, which for various reasons did not satisfy the definition of *grave*. Substantial part of the Holocaust victims were killed in executions by Nazi Germans, their auxiliaries (including “Blue” Police and Christian neighbours) outside death camps. They were typically buried on the sites where they were killed: in woods, fields, roadsides and meadows. The burial was carried out by the perpetrators or residents of the area. These locations were not marked by a stone, a mound, a matzevah, a cross or a plaque and are an indistinguishable part of a landscape. Only local inhabitants are able to identify the sites where human remains were buried.

In describing these places, Zybala used the term: “burials-denied-Kaddish” (in Polish: *pochówki bezkadzizowe*), “extra-cemetery burials” (*pozacmentarne pochówki*), “wild burial sites” (*dzikie miejsca pochówków*), “wild burials” (*grzebalnictwo dzikie*) (M. Zybala, S. Zybala 2004; S. Zybala 2001; Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz and S. Zybala 2015). The first two phrases use the portmanteau neologisms invented by Zybala (“burials-denied-Kaddish” or “non-Kaddish”, “extra-cemetery”). These phrases emphasize the absence of a funeral ritual at the burial of the remains in the ground and in the placing of the remains outside the grounds of the cemetery; the Jewishness of the victims and the absence of guardians of memory who might have said prayers for the deceased.

The word “dzikie” (rendered here as the English “wild”) may convey a sense of the transgressive character inscribed in this way of proceeding with victims’ remains. The notions invented by Zybala imply that bodies were not buried according to the rules of the cultural order, but were handled in a ‘barbaric’ or ‘primitive’ – but also careless and accidental – way. Moreover, Zybala suggests that the disposal of bodies was performed by actors not only outside of culture, but also far removed from human norms – “wild” also means bestial, animalistic. His colloquialism/neologism “grzebalnictwo” (“burial”) imitates an abstract noun formed in Polish from a verb; the group of verbs normally declined in this way includes verbs for professions and activities, so its use suggests collective, repetitive and deliberate action. The participle form “grzebanie” (literally “furrowing away” – in the ground or in a bag, for example) is strongly associated in Polish with funeral vocabulary and the dominating use of variations on the word “pogrzeb” (“funeral”). However, “grzebanie” is in the Polish *imperfective* form, emphasizing the incomplete status of the actions of digging over bodies. It also carries a pejorative connotation: furrowing, rummaging, doing something incompetently, unprofessionally, with difficulty. “Wild (“rummaging”) burials” in Polish suggests repeated movements, actions of digging over human remains (but not a proper burial, certainly not a funeral) in accidental places carried out in a negligent way, performatively expressing radical hatred

towards the victims by transgressing all cultural norms (Muchowski, Szczepan 2019).

The explorer and the collector

The figure of the explorer is played by Lucjan Kołodziejski, a history teacher from Borzęcin, a village in the Brzesko County in Lesser Poland, and a place of genocide against Jewish and Roma Poles.⁴ His historical activities seem to be subordinated to the drive to extract previously unknown information about the past of Borzęcin. He has written about the execution of Romani in the nearby wood; the history of Jewish inhabitants of the village; the peasant revolt from the 1930s; the history of the Borzęcin parish and the Spanish flu epidemic. Kołodziejski’s yearning for exploration includes everything that belongs to the past; he is constantly thirsty for new and undiscovered elements of past realities, with the one condition that it must concern Borzęcin. The desire to explore everything observed in Kołodziejski’s practices is an obsession of the entire discipline of history, which – devoid of a clearly delineated subject of study – covers everything that changes over time (Le Goff 1992). However, the desire to discover new information about the past in this case takes a surprising form: after revealing a specific fragment of the past, Kołodziejski does not undertake its full elaboration, but looks for another unknown data. An example of a collector, on the other hand, is Paweł Domański, a retired teacher from nearby Żabno. Domański is the creator and the curator of the Żabno historical museum and a chronicler of the town. He is the person behind more than 18 publications on the subject of Żabno. As Domański himself stresses, only a local historian could have set up this kind of museum, with all its exhibits being obtained from the town’s inhabitants who had, therefore, to trust their curator and neighbour.

The uncompromising nature of Kołodziejski’s exploratory passion and Domański’s commitment to chronicling have key critical consequences. In their work they both speak openly about the post-war fates of Jewish property in Borzęcin and Żabno, although the subject of the acquisition of Jewish real estate and belongings by the Christian population still remains a taboo subject in the Polish public sphere (Grabowski and Libionka 2014; Matyjaszek 2019; Sendyka 2019). During the Holocaust the valuable part of Jewish moveable property was captured by Nazi Germans and their auxiliaries, while what remained – less valuable victim’s belongings, their workshops with tools, and houses – were taken over by local Christian residents. In extensive fragments of their own work, Kołodziejski and Domański scrupulously map out the Jewish societies of their areas, on the basis of the reports of elderly inhabitants and local civil registries. With

4 Borzęcin is a village in the Brzesko county, in Małopolska (Lesser Poland) Voivodship, with approx. 3,700 inhabitants. A few Roma families settled and lived there and 143 inhabitants lost their lives in World War II, including 43 Jews. In July 1943 at least 29 Romas were murdered in Borzęcin. Aleksandra Szczepan and Łukasz Posłuszny with Kinga Siewior worked on that case. Nearby Żabno today has 4,200 inhabitants.

these sources in hand, they have been able to describe the society of Jewish families with the surnames and forenames of their members, with the father's profession and real estate owned. A result of Domański's work is a list of Jewish shops, workshops, warehouses and the names of the Christian families who currently reside there (Domański 2003). Kołodziejski has prepared a catalogue of homes in today's Borzęcin: it is enough to have an address and under that entry one finds all the members of the Jewish family that lived there in the past (Kołodziejski).

These critical facts appear in the authors' texts without a word of commentary on the controversial nature of the knowledge conveyed. This situation can be read as the result of the passion of the explorer, or the collector-chronicler, or as the unwitting result of fidelity towards a particular type of data. Also at play may be the partial separation of local and public debate, as Kołodziejski and Domański work in a local environment that is less subordinated to the reigning norms than one might suppose. The development of critical knowledge that infringes existing taboos – something avoided by most professional researchers into 20th century Poland – comes easier to them.

Vernacular historians

In describing the people engaged in the above practices, I have used the term "vernacular historian". Ten years ago, Lyle Dick used this notion to discuss practices of local historians, who had been active in the Canadian prairies in the XIX and XX centuries (Dick 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Devine 2016, 2017). Lyle made three tentative observations about the practice of vernacular historians. Firstly, academic historians hold the rule of objectivity in high regard and therefore adopt a distanced attitude; vernacular historians are usually committed to and identify themselves with the subject of interest and the public interest. Vernacular historians also tend to treat historical activities as a means to achieving social and political ends: strengthening the identity of a local community and supporting the wider appreciation of its problems. Secondly, the term "traditional" does not really apply to vernacular writing as there is too much diversity there. We should avoid the false impression that vernacular history only draws on old, pre-modern cultural forms or only on local, unofficial and unprofessional knowledge. Vernacular practices remain under the influence of contemporary and modern as well as national, official and professional elements of cultural reality. What is more, despite its anchoring in local knowledge, vernacular history develops in a relationship with the main trends in historiography. It is not that knowledge spreads only by the diffusion of the dominant matrix into local parts or that the vernacular historian only relies on key local resources. Thirdly, it is fruitful to avoid a straight opposition of professional and vernacular: better

to acknowledge both kinds of history as extreme points on a continuum of historical practices. The position of the vernacular historian does not only result from local, racial or class identifications, but may be adopted out of a strong commitment to the vernacular community and its problems (Dick 2010a; Devine 2016, 2017).

Some remarks are required on the introduction of Dick's term to the description of actors from the Polish peripheries of cultures of memory anchored in non-sites of memory. His observations are generally correct in reference to the actions undertaken by those our team interacted with. Nevertheless, the vernacular historians of the Canadian prairie investigated the difficult past of colonialism, migration, race and English dominations – from the perspective of minority groups and out of support for them. In my research, on the other hand, I apply Dick's proposal to the description of representatives of the *majority* community who have decided to act on behalf of the minority victims of genocidal violence. Their actions have exposed them to the risk of being marginalized in their own community. Unburied human remains powerfully draw their attention, drive their commitment and provoke them to develop experimental and unconventional historical practices.

Vernacular historians take this risk when they write about the complicity of Christian Poles in the Holocaust, a topic discussed at length in the work *Dalej jest noc* by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski. Andrzej Pałka, as he declared in conversations with us, acts on behalf of the Jewish victims of Polish violence in local memory activities; Stanisław Zybala, whose findings concerning the Holocaust in Biłgoraj district are used by the authors of the aforementioned work, writes about a pogrom in Radechnica in October 1939 perpetrated by Christian Poles and murders of Jewish Poles hiding in the Radechnica area in 1942-1943 carried out by the Navy-Blue Police and neighbours (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz R, Zybala SR 2015); Kołodziejski and Domański write about Christian neighbours taking over Jewish property⁵.

Conclusion

The terms proposed by Dick – with the reservations mentioned above – provide a good characterization of vernacular historians and their activity as experimental combinations of the components of the work of the professional historian and ways of working conditioned by local cultural environments, individual experience and commitment to communal life. They have the potential to facilitate critical operations on local and perhaps regional or national cultures of memory co-created by non-sites of memory. The adaptation of historiographical authentication methods for the needs of local knowledge; linguistic creativity serving the recognition and

5 Kołodziejski also writes about the involvement of Blue Policemen and local residents in the July 1943 massacres of Roma in Borzęcin (Kołodziejski 2014).

naming of the material elements of non-sites; the desire for discovering history and the chronicler's willingness to infringe the taboos of public debate; excessive activism – all these features make up the productive historical practices we observed in the course of our research, practices that have led to the creation of new, socially relevant knowledge. Two of them – the recognition of the material anchoring of the culture of memory or the exposure of problems of Jewish property – coincide with the latest trends in Polish humanities.⁶ It is important that this work is bottom-up, grassroots activity that intervenes in the memory of a local community from the inside out. This enables these trends to be less confrontational and sometimes more effective than undertakings by actors working from the outside in.

I observed two distinct features of vernacular historical practices in non-sites of memory. Firstly, the lack of patterns of historical approach to this type of difficult localizations forces people involved in their protection to undertake unconventional, sometimes experimental activities. It should be noted, however, that the described researchers also used historical devices to neutralize the disturbing heritage. The use of the chronicle style, which sparingly, meticulously and aloofly reports facts, produced the effect of separating the present from the past, the matters that require commitment from the process of producing objective historical knowledge. Secondly, these unmarked sites of burial attract activists and push them to undertake historical practices. The status of uncommemorated scenes of crimes means that work on them does not mainly happen in professional historical circles. Most often it is vernacular historians that first scrupulously describe non-sites. The challenge facing practitioners of history is how to go beyond one's own society with one's own information, experience and interpretations – to present that same society to a regional or national audience (e.g. in the form of nationwide publications), to be able to fill in gaps in the historical debate and do historical justice to the victims.

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⁶ See the forensic turn in memory studies, e.g. Dziuban 2016; Sendyka 2017b; studies in the post-war history of Jewish property in Poland: e.g. Grabowski and Libionka 2014; Matyjaszek 2019, Sendyka 2019; environmental history of Holocaust: e.g. Małczyński 2018; or human remains studies: e.g. Domańska 2018.

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