
Oral History as a Selection of Sources

Discussion around „*O tym nie wolno mówić...*” Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali [“We Are not Allowed to Speak about It...” The Extermination of Jews in Memoirs from the Collection of Dionizjusz Czubala]

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Abstract: This article reviews the book „*O tym nie wolno mówić...*” *Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali* [“We Are Not Allowed to Speak About It...” The Extermination of Jews in Memoirs from the Collection of Dionizjusz Czubala], selected and edited by Piotr Grochowski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, Toruń 2019, 236 pp.

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Introduction – historical source between fact and myth

There is no history without sources, or at least no history as a science and academic discipline as we know it today. There is more to it: historians are said to stand out among scholars in the humanities and social sciences because of the way they work with sources. They determine the sources' existence, they locate them, reach them – physically, in the best-case scenario, as this generates the most powerful effect of making contact with the past. And then sifting through the sources follows, dismissing irrelevant ones, and ordering those of importance for a given topic or matter. Finally, and ideally, they are thoroughly interpreted, which is known in professional history under the specialised term *source criticism*. The goal is to make sure – or at least to get as close to certainty as possible – that pure truth and certain knowledge gushes from the source. Otherwise, it would be unworthy of its ossified metaphorical name.

Drawing on thus acquired, selected, edited, and later masterfully criticised sources, historians determine historical facts on which they build their (and immediately somewhat “our”) stories about the past – about what happened in the past, how things were, what they resulted from and what consequences they led to, what greater processes and “laws” they were a part or an exemplification. And very often also – how we should evaluate that today.

Seen from this pragmatic perspective which definitely prevails in historical work, the source is supposed to mediate between the researcher and the bygone reality. It is the best – the easiest and most certain, at least apparently – when the source forms an integral part of the reality in question. Hence the preference for sources “from the period”, for “traces of the past”. And also for sources that are “found”, and not “elicited”, according to one of their many known categorisations.

Another major practical advantage of sources “from the period” is their aura of authenticity, which diverts attention away from philosophical questions about the very nature of sourceness – and also questions about the manner of understanding *historic* facts and events in relation to history, to what happens and lasts in history (about history as a source of facts – and facts as an emanation of history), and to their relation to *historiographic* facts or events, which are, after all, the subject of historians’ work (Topolski, 2016a). Historians usually write about facts guided by the sense, or at least by the assumption, of full congruence between facts and history (if they note and acknowledge such differentiation at all), and by the conviction that nothing “underneath the facts” is worthy of their attention.¹ Or that there is simply nothing there at all. Still, admittedly, the spectrum of kinds and variants of such historiographic facts has grown exponentially in the recent years and today it encompasses also configurations of humans and non-humans, which until recently would not have come to historians’ mind.

However, even after the extension of this “source base” of modern-day historical studies, the question about the nature of sourceness itself retains its philosophical topicality. The more sources are in use (or, as I would rather say: are called into being) that are varied and differentiate the past to an ever greater extent, the more important this question becomes. And if the “nature of sourceness” sounds dated and overly enigmatic here, we may follow Jerzy Topolski in stating – although this is obviously not the only possible grasp of this concept – that we are dealing with the mode of understanding the historical process. And that we are also dealing with this processes philosophy or theory, which is, after all, always present in historical studies, although so seldom realised and problematised. Reasons for this lack of problematisation are actually not that difficult to understand. The ability to locate and decipher sources often requires such considerable competences and takes so much work that it leaves no time and energy for “philosophical meditations”. This is perhaps also the reason behind the persistent conservatism of the vast majority of historical writing and its constant gravitation towards “positivism” (Stobiecki, 2007/2008; Wiślicz 2019). Moreover, it is noteworthy that the latest revisions of consolidated images and interpretations of Polish history, or rather its “fragments”, have been attempted by non-historians – to mention Jan Tomasz Gross, Jan Sowa, Andrzej Leder, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir. Symptomatically,

1 Numerous exceptions obviously exist to this mode of practising historiography, which is dominant but criticised from many perspectives. The most renowned ones are represented by writings of the Annales school circle, which do not concentrate on facts, let alone political facts, but long-term “historical” processes.

these scholars immediately came under fire precisely for being non-historians, not initiated enough into the arcane details of work with historical sources, and lacking a proper “toolbox” – notwithstanding the differences in their ways of working with historical sources (and their choice of sources itself).

Abandoning reflection on sourceness results in creation of the “myth of historical source”, as described by Jerzy Topolski, and in failure to notice one’s own cognitive entanglement. It is not as much a failure to notice one’s own “extraneous knowledge” contributed to research, without which any sensible (in the hermeneutic and colloquial sense alike) historiography would not be possible, but also a more profound “vision of the world and the human being” (Topolski, 2016b). Effectively, such omission conditions both methodology of research and the ontology of the represented historical world, that non-existent “strange reality”, to use Krzysztof Zamorski’s term (Zamorski, 2008).

A probing, as well as lucid and synthetic, review of theoretical problems posed by sources and sourceness has been quite recently proposed by the historian Marcin Moskalewicz, who sketched a simple, descriptive definition of the historical source, developing Topolski’s definition that the source is “everything that can come in helpful in constructing the image of the past” (Topolski, 1996, p. 338). Moskalewicz’s categorization is worth quoting at length as it will be useful further on in this text:

Ultimately, everything is a source, every object and thought: legal act, love letter, testament, novel with fictitious protagonists, artwork, film and musical score, bits stored on thousands of servers and, finally, human or animal body or its remnants, geographic environment, both transformed or left intact by humans. On the other hand, the source is a never fully articulated oral tradition, deposits of collective memory, the past present in language, in its concepts and everyday non-verbal gestures. Finally, the lack of a source, something omitted or forgotten, may also serve as a source, on the basis of which – following the argumentum ex silentio principle – we will draw (uncertain) conclusions concerning the existence or non-existence of certain “facts”. (Moskalewicz, 2008, p. 12)

But something has to be chosen from all such “everything”. Historians most often choose what can be found in the archive. One archive or another, although this is rather far from random as the institution of the archive also plays an important role in lending legitimacy. The association of sources with archives appears obvious. The archive, according to its most common understanding – as an institution with a director, a cloakroom and opening hours – is the primary research “territory” of the modern-day historian.² Archive is necessary and apparently sufficient for recognition of her or his work as scientifically valid. After all, this situation is perpetuated by almost every academic historical book, which features – usually at the very beginning – a list of archives visited by the author and abbreviations of their names, which will then flicker with high frequency on the following pages.

2 Different answers are given to the question whether and how the archive (that is work with materials gathered therein) can be treated as a “territory” of anthropological research. See critically: Wróblewski, 2019.

Aside from the obvious “reference” function, each such footnote offers a tiny proof of the researcher’s ability to make a fundamental cut between reality graspable through “sources” gathered and available in archives, and the reality’s whole boundless and impenetrable “rest”. Even if this cut is always only apparent, it allows for preserving a minimum (or maximum, in a worse-case scenario) of cognitive certainty. It offers security in the professional circle as well – no matter what is written “personally”, one can always count on praise from colleagues for gathering an impressive “source material” and successfully mastering the “scholarly apparatus”. The choice of the topic, the research perspective, the mode of developing a historical narrative, its “tropological” structure, its persuasive dimension – all these and many other layers of historical writing, let alone the “vision of the world and the human being”, are likely relegated to the margins in such everyday, handy, practical-positivistic philosophy of history. It does not seem to be infiltrated in any noticeable measure by Gadamer’s hermeneutics, Hayden White’s structuralism (perhaps too hastily dismissed along with postmodernism), or the Polish-language writing of Jerzy Topolski, to mention just a few renowned theorists of history who could offer some help in demythologising historical sources and nuancing our images of the past.

It is also possible that these theories (or any “theories” whatsoever) were not widely accepted because they had been tailored for the comfortable times of “the end of history”, when unrestrained exchange of historical narratives was set to replace the struggle for historical truth? Hard to say, though, because those times, so prominently announced and much expected, probably never came (or lasted so very briefly and passed almost unnoticed), and we turned out to be not (post)modern enough to loosen our attachment to sources. What has come is rather a time of memory – of remembering, reminding, reminiscing, commemorating, reproaching non-remembrance... Textbooks of memory studies have expanded and continue to do so at an extraordinary pace.

Therefore, for important reasons, we began to draw various historical sources from archives and to compile and index them, quote them in historical books, exhibit them in a plethora of nascent or revived museums and exhibitions. We (a community interested in its past, and conflicted about it) justified these actions with care for historical memory (doing so against persistent notion that history has little in common with memory and remembering), in name of memory of victims or heroes finally set free after long years. In some cases, we also evoked historical sources in emotional historical debates. The most important and most heated of these debates have concerned what took place between Poles and Jews (or more precisely, between non-Jewish Poles and Polish Jews) during the Second World War and in its aftermath. A publication of fundamental importance here was obviously *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross (Gross, 2001), followed by his subsequent, albeit not as seminal, *Fear* (Gross, 2006), and *Golden Harvest* (the latter co-authored by Irena Grudzińska-Gross) (Gross & Grudzińska-Gross,

2012). Eventually, some voices from these debates have been compiled in yet another “source selections”, following the probably right assumption that they will well facilitate studies on memory and discourse analyses, and, in the course of time, will perhaps allow also more distanced research in the field of the history of historiography.³

New sources – oral histories

The recent years, however, have not only been a time of extracting sources from archives, interpreting and disseminating them in historical writings and public debates. It is also a time of their intensive “elicitation”. I am referring here to Polish research projects in oral history, emergent during the last two or three decades. Some of these numerous initiatives were taken internationally, while others functioned as Polish contribution to broader projects.⁴ Others, a vast majority, were initiated by individuals as part of research projects, or, increasingly, by a variety of research, archival, museum, and educational institutions working with recent history. Many of such institutions have been founded, conducting various oral history projects, not always labelled precisely as such. Many professional archives of accounts of “witnesses to history” have also been established. In a parallel way, oral history is gradually gaining its position in the academic sphere. This position is not yet fully independent, but perhaps ever more stable in the field of taught history, historical anthropology, biographical sociology, memory studies, or ethnography.

It is not my intention here to outline the history of Polish oral history. Synthetic and specialized texts in this field have been published and provide a departure point for important, albeit rather internal discussions on the status of this academic and extra-academic practice/sub-discipline/method (?) of documenting and researching the past, or perhaps only memory, as some argue.⁵ These discussions bring about the question on the critical potential of oral history, its ability to revise consolidated images of the past and to review, if only locally and with a limited scope, dominant historiographic narratives. After all, oral history globally has had and still happens to have a critical and emancipatory drive.

Meanwhile, Polish oral history, which develops so dynamically and has already become so pluralistically institutionalised, has undertaken such critical or interventionist

3 Example from a relevant area: *Wokół złotych żniw. Debata o książce Jana Tomasza Grossa i Ireny Grudzińskiej Gross* (Lis, 2011).

4 The most extensive such project – and a point of reference, also critical, for many later ones – is still the Spielberg Archive, within which more than 52,000 testimonies of (mainly, but not only) Jewish survivors from the Holocaust were recorded in the mid-1990s across the world. Other such international projects include Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project (2002–2003) and International Slave-and Forced Labourers’ Documentation Project (2005–2006). More on this topic in: Filipkowski, 2013.

5 See the recent publication: Stasiak, 2018.

historiographic work only to a limited degree to date. For various reasons, it has so far concentrated rather on “eliciting”, and then editing sources and making them available, instead of their critical analysis. Even less attention has been paid to using them as a basis for constructing more distinctive, synthetic historical narratives that could become subject to public debates and offer support for revisions of consolidated images of the past (such as books by the above-mentioned authors). Also little attention was given to creating new historical images that would surprise as they alter the very way of understanding the past, ones changing the perception of sourceness, not only adding to the knowledge about what happened and “how it was”. Such a change cannot be made without infringing on the mentioned handy “positivism” that the majority of historical studies rely on, and without proposing a different, perhaps less handy – not as commonsensical – philosophy of history.

This may sound like an accusation of weakness or immaturity of Polish oral history. Or at least as a diagnosis of its defeat in the clash with “real” academic historiography, written on the basis of robust archival documents and respected studies, and not based what people say (or used to say), or even whisper (or used to whisper), in their homes, farms and backyards. Oral history in Poland seems to remain in the shadow of academic historiography, written with support in a “source base”, but also written from the position of an external, impersonal and omniscient narrator, position that fosters the illusion of full cognitive control over sources, and therefore over facts.

Yet, I do not want to sound accusative towards such oral history that does not undertake overt interventions, but which delivers selections of “its own” sources, and allows them to be accessed and read. These oral history publications are usually edited and accompanied by additional comments (introductions, afterwords), and contain records of conversations/interviews/narratives/testimonies, either recently conducted or extracted from private or institutional archives. Such sources – either published at length according to a biographical key or arranged thematically around main, recurrent threads in a given set of stories – clearly represent an achievement of Polish oral history of the recent years, although it is perhaps not recognised and valued as such. This oral history has been practised in various ways and in various fields and disciplinary variations, often at their junctions and intersections. It also concerns various historical subjects, but mostly refers to World War II and the Holocaust (and their aftermaths), and also to experiences of democratic opposition in the Polish People’s Republic, or to the transformation of the political regime after 1989 (Polish oral history therefore remains close to mainstream historiography in terms of approached topics). These “source selections” function under different names: reportage or non-fiction literature (e.g. Grupińska, 2013; Wiszniewicz, 2018),⁶ a sub-genre of historical-biographical literature (e.g. Madoń-Mitzner, Szymańska, & Buko, 2017; Pałka & Kaźmierska, 2018) or historiography – also revolving around specific fields (Marecki, 2009; Słodkowski & Gendera, 2014) (in

6 The dates provided mark the latest editions of these books reprinted a number of times.

such cases it usually appears directly as oral history), and more recently also sociology (Wawrzyniak & Leyk, 2020). Such collections are seldom attributed to anthropology/ethnology or ethnography, which is only seemingly surprising, since these disciplines are founded on the belief in the possibility of a more direct, multisensory cognition of the researched world than one offered by a mediation of a narrative.

Ethnography as “eliciting sources”

I would not seek for similarities and shared sources of these very different research practices, and I would not label them together as works of oral history, had it not been for the modest-sized and inconspicuous book *„O tym nie wolno mówić...” Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych Dionizjusza Czubali* [“We Are not Allowed to Speak about It...” The Extermination of Jews in Memoirs from the Collection of Dionizjusz Czubala] (Grochowski, 2019). In terms of its genre, this publication is precisely a “source selection”. This term does not appear on the cover or in the subtitle (tellingly, it also remains unmentioned in all of the works discussed here). Yet a cursory flick through the book’s pages leaves no doubt that it indeed is a source study, something of a body of “raw data”.

This is primarily suggested by consciously (I assume) concealed and therefore strongly problematised authorship of the book. Its title mentions Dionizjusz Czubala, a Silesian folklorist, researcher of myths and urban legends (Czubala, 1993), but not as the book’s author, but as a researcher-collector, creator of the body of memoirs. The authorship of these stories is attributed to individuals who recounted them to Czubala, which is a strategy worth emphasizing, since it is only seemingly an obvious one, even in the field of oral history. Czubala’s interlocutors’ authorship is not exclusive, however, since, the second “author” is the very language of these stories (one that in many stories definitely comes to forefront: it is overriding, it shuffles and distributes words and phrases). It is language that speaks *through* narrators. Or perhaps, *speaks with them*, to use Witold Gombrowicz’s phrase. Language is not understood here solely as a “communication tool”, used to discuss past facts and people whom interlocutors talk about, but also as a medium that represents and at the same time co-constitutes their world.⁷ And not only the “symbolic” world, but also the interpersonal one, downright real, as it unfolds on the sharp, perhaps the sharpest known, binary edge: the border between life and death.

7 I obviously refer here to the fundamental principles of socio- and ethnolinguistics, especially the concept of the linguistic image of the world, developed by Jerzy Bartmiński and his collaborators. See Bartmiński & Paprocka, 2006).

What testifies to the fact that language itself is at stake in this work as a key dimension of culture and social differentiations is the sheer manner of quoting interlocutors' statements. These quotations form the bulk of the book (nearly 75% of its volume) and are arranged chronologically in three groups: *Before the War*, *War and Occupation*, *After the War*. The quotes are numbered continuously, however, as if independently from this chronology. There are 19 fragments related to the first period (nos. 1-19), as many as 173 related to the war (nos. 20-192), and 19 more concerning the post-war period (nos. 193-211). These quotes are varied in length and in narrative forms – from a few brief sentences, to several-page-long eponymous “memorial accounts” and extensive dialogues between the researcher (not always Czubala) and the narrator, sometimes also with an active participation of another person, usually their wife, husband, or daughter. Each of these fragments bears a descriptive title or topic, as well as mentions the location. E.g.: 23. *A Jew doesn't want to find rescue. Story from Zawiercie*; 50. *Death in a basement flat. Story from Pińczów*; 89. *Saved by on sheaf of straw. Story from Biskupice*; 103. *Partisans kill a Jew. Story from Pełczyńska*; 132. *Poles hide Jews. Story from Probołowice*; 150. *Germans murder Jews. Story from Sosnowiec*; 173. *Jewish women pretend to be Catholic. Story from Koszyce*; 196. *Grateful physician. Story from Nowy Korczyn*; 205. *Jewish treasures I. Story from Sosnowiec* (a number of fragments of different stories sometimes concern the same event, in which case they are additionally numbered I, II, III, IV, etc.).

This random selection of titles shows clearly enough that they oscillate between purely informational indication of the content from one side (resembling labelling, tagging and coding in anthropological and sociological research), and from the other – free indirect speech, which conveys the modes of understanding, perceiving and experiencing the world by interlocutors. Therefore, even at the level of ordering sources and coding information, we are presented with a micro-catalogue of linguistic world images. However, the “world” consists here of very specific, dramatic events, deciding on human life, survival and, most often, death.

One more, perhaps unintended, suggestion that such language (or rather *speech*) should be treated as a co-author of the work and at the same time its historical causative actor, is found in the final sections of the book, titled *List and documentation of stories* and *Index of motifs* (followed by *Index of locations* and English-language *Summary*, typical for historical publications). The first of these indexes contains a list of all quotes, complete with an indication of the person who authored them. However, these individuals are not mentioned by their name and surname (anonymisation of speakers is a common practice in anthropological and sociological studies, however it can be problematic in oral history), but are identified instead by their basic social “parameters”. Several examples: 11. *Cat in a synagogue. Delivered by a woman, b. 1902, housewife. Recorded by: Ireneusz Zdebel, 1988, Czeladź*; 76. *Boy in a barn. Delivered by a man, b. 1913, farmer. Recorded by: DC [Dionizjusz Czubala – PF], 1975, Działoszyn*; 195. *Poles refuse to*

admit helping Jews. Delivered by a man, b. 1912, intellectual. Recorded by: DC, 1976, Kazimierza Wielka. And so on – such notes describe all quoted fragments.

Of note is not only the age, gender and profession of the participants of ethnographic research from many years ago, but also the use of the word *delivered* [Polish: *podał, podała*; association with *podanie*, a folk tale, appears here, although this “folk” is very varied]. Even if this phrase manifests nothing but Polish-language ethnographic lingo or universally accepted convention of quoting statements by interlocutors (or *informants*, as they are called in classic ethnography), it acquires an additional meaning here. Narrators not so much recollect their own experiences or create stories (although this might be suggested by the subtitle), but *deliver* them. And, after all, one delivers something that is ready, something likely drawn up by someone else (e.g. language or “culture”). Notwithstanding the fact that a woman delivers it differently from a man, a male farmer differently from a female teacher, and a person born in 1896 does so differently from someone born in 1955. Also the *Index of motifs* leaves no doubt that we are dealing with a selection of sources that focus on what people *deliver*, on a certain *represented world*. Which obviously does not contradict the fact that these statements refer to historical facts, and are Holocaust testimonies at the most elementary, micro-factographic level.

These facts are increasingly well-known to researchers of the Holocaust, and of “Polish-Jewish relations” under the German occupation and in its immediate aftermath. I am unaware of a particular historical study on occupation and the Holocaust in Czubala’s research field – Dąbrowa Coal Basin area and the southern part of Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship, but the “types” of facts are broadly known, representing the full spectrum of Polish “bystanding” the Holocaust, affectively ranging from hatred – satisfaction – indifference – curiosity – dread – compassion – and perhaps also friendship and love. And “functionally” stretched between cruel murder – physical violence in its various forms, from abusing, beating, to mere “bullying” – denunciation – reporting – robbing and taking over possessions – turning a blind eye – accidental aid – and giving refuge for months (which involved multiplicity of emotions and actions). This set of categories is of course not a complete catalogue of events or facts (usually described by narrators with use of different terms), but a set of orientation points on the historical map of this spectrum.

Czubala’s speakers evoke events they know about, which are mostly widely “known” in a given area (or used to be known). Few of them recount what they saw themselves, directly participated in, or experienced. One account stands out by its length, density and factographic intensity – the story about hiding three Jews (siblings) by Józef Tarka, particularly the account given by Tarka himself and by his daughter (*delivered reports* from their neighbours are also quoted). Another one is the story of “Marysia from Odrzywół”, who was kept in hiding by Józef Smaczyński, and married him after the war – as well as the account by Smaczyński himself (once again, accompanied by neighbours’

delivered reports). These two represent rare narratives that involve also survival, and not only death from the hands of German occupiers and Polish “neighbours”. But these brighter moments hardly illuminate the grim vision of the Holocaust that emanates from these narrative sources.

Czubala does not seek to “balance” these stories and make calculations that allow for categorising certain approaches, feelings and acts as dominant, others as minority, or as marginal and thus allegedly of lesser importance (strategies all-too-familiar from the mentioned historical debates). He does not build a synthetic “how it was”. In a nutshell – he does not write history. He simply lets his interlocutors speak and quotes all Holocaust-related fragments gathered during the many years of ethnographic research in his geographical area.

Reading these sources left me with the impression that this area was yet another “night without end county”, although this might be a matter of my *reception style*, to use category proposed by Michał Głowiński almost half a century ago (Głowiński, 1975, 1977) – my inability to counterbalance negative aspects with positive ones. I can imagine that another reader might want to erect a monument there, or even a museum to commemorate those who helped and rescued... (for now, I cannot muster enough imagination to think about a monument to the murdered and the rescued).

Facts based on motifs – or oral history as ethnography

As I mentioned before, the sourceness of these “memorial accounts” is connected rather to the modes of representing events (and people), to turning facts into a narrative – and not to facts in and of themselves. The focus is rather on what people say about facts – and *how* they speak about them – than on the very course of events that they fragmentarily reconstruct. It is the motifs that take centre stage – not only narrative-related ones, but also those related to “consciousness” and “culture”. Motifs on which stories are built, and which are employed to link fundamental and dramatic facts, to give them perspective and sense.

The *Index of Motifs* well facilitates orientating between these world-depicting devices. Here are several entries that demonstrate modes of stereotyping Jews (precisely, sub-entries of the category *Myths, stereotypes, opinions about Jews*): *Jews are rich*, *Jews are false*, *Jews are communists*, *Jews are stingy*, *Jews take up the best jobs*. And some more from the category *Helping Jews*: *Poles refuse to admit helping Jews*, *Poles get richer by helping Jews*; *Survivors fail to show gratitude or show it insufficiently*.

Czubala himself places importance on this ethnographic, and not historical, dimension of the testimonies he gathered – in the introduction, he writes as follows:

We need to bear in mind, however, that the folklorist does not seek historical facts, but records texts belonging to oral literature, which are passed on during a certain time for the sake of satisfying certain human needs and which indeed exist in the social circulation. During the interviews, I asked the interlocutors many inquisitive questions, but they mostly served to underscore my interest in the story, and to mobilise the storyteller when he or she became silent or interrupted the account. (Grochowski, 2019, p. 41)

The term “storyteller” often features in his writing. He also uses the phrases “collecting folklore”, “folklorisation of facts”, “repertoire of stories”. At the same time, Czubala declares that his research – launched in the mid-1970s and carried for more than ten years – draws inspiration from a “new” genre of folk literature, labelled at the time as “realist story”, “memorial account”, “life story”, “biographical story”. He also adds that the main reason behind his focus on World War II narratives was his own biographical experience – his childhood memory of the occupation, including witnessing the Holocaust (Grochowski, 2019, pp. 38-39).

Importantly, the same index of motifs turns out to be also an excellent guide to the events, experiences and facts as they were remembered and evoked by narrators: *Germans murder Jews, Poles murder Jews, Jews murdered by hosts keeping them in hiding, Helping Jews – hiding Jews in homes, basements, farm buildings*. Some of these *motifs* feature one or two references to sources (fragments of narratives), others feature several or more than ten, but there are also those – such as the latter ones about hiding Jews – that feature dozens. What matters here, however, is not the number of stories connected to a given topic (no calculations make sense here, whether done in good or bad faith), but the fact that numerous references direct to a single source. Such multi-directional index allows precise tracing of interlinking *motifs* and *facts*.

The book is therefore a work in folklore studies and ethnography, but one made powerfully real in existential terms, both on the part of the researcher and the researched. A particular evidence of this realistic dimension are narratives where narrators ask the researcher for confidentiality and for keeping their testimonies unpublished: “I’ll tell you how it was, but don’t note it down”, “Don’t take this into account”, “There’s no need to write about it”, and the eponymous phrase “We are not allowed to speak about it...”.

And yet, they do speak, as if unable to hide the truth, be it “historical” truth, or just their own. This is not the case with every single person, however. The researcher offers examples of persistent passing over the topic of the Holocaust in silence. Particularly telling in this respect are two “memorial accounts” lasting for hours, mentioned in the introduction, given by people who kept Jews in hiding during the war and fail to mention it in any way whatsoever (Czubala knew about it from other sources). They simply omit this “subject” in their wartime stories. We step into the sphere of mute, unarticulated facts, hedged with non-disclosure clauses – and therefore most likely repressed, and therefore existentially powerful and culturally significant. We need to resort to drawing conclusions *ex silentio*. Oral history can be of help.

This is where the last co-author of the discussed book should be introduced: the anthropologist Piotr Grochowski from Toruń. His name is absent from the cover and appears only on the inside title page under “selection and editing”. It was therefore him who brought Czubala’s archive out into the open and delivered the sources gathered by him to print – in consultation and collaboration with Czubala himself. He also wrote the important introduction, which situates Czubala – and the accounts he gathered – in the tradition of Holocaust studies and oral history.

Such attribution is not unproblematic, because oral history has its own tradition, separate from ethnographic research. This refers especially to the broadly understood field of Holocaust testimony, which offers methodological inspiration for many Polish-language studies and archives, but which clearly differs from classic ethnographic methods. The main difference, I believe, is that it heavily individualises interlocutors as “witnesses”, and extracts their stories from the current of life and from ordinary communication, embracing them as “testimonies”. Both these gestures cannot fully succeed, if only because language is always common, and many-hour-long narratives of witnesses are often combined together from consolidated mini-stories that are frequently told “naturally”. The cognitive orientation of oral history and ethnography (as well as ethno-linguistics) are markedly different. The former seeks uniqueness and singularity, the latter – typicality and repetitiveness.

Do however both find what they look for? Grochowski convincingly shows that it is not necessarily so. That “raw data” or sources such as those gathered by Czubala problematise and complicate powerful disciplinary and methodological attributions, including the author’s self-identification as a folklorist uninterested in facts (as quoted above). It also exposes his own inconsistencies, as Grochowski shows, because a folklorist should work by “eavesdropping” and passive listening, whereas Czubala actively talks to people and asks them a multiplicity of questions. He therefore does not “collect” data that is “found”, but actively elicits them, frequently overcoming the reluctance of narrators to recollect the past, especially the past that concerns Jews. Or encounters a wall of silence.

I would add to these diagnoses that the obverse of Czubala’s material is constituted by the common “force of orality”, narrative folklore as well as various “fables”, “tales”, motifs and schemes of “folk knowledge”, and among them, to be clear, a set of antisemitic stereotypes that allow to continue thinking and talking about Jewish neighbours as cultural others, radically alien. This material’s reverse is the shared “pact of silence”, as well as “silent” individual testimonies that break it. And further underneath lies the mysterious, ambiguous *speech of silence*.

Grochowski rightly highlights in his introduction the historical value of Czubala’s sources. It is indeed important that we are offered a documentation of pioneering Polish ethnographic research into witnessing the Holocaust (even if that was not this work’s main focus), a work in Holocaust oral history performed before the “witness era”,

still unknown at the time. All of this matters, but primarily at an insider level: as a part of the self-knowledge of the discipline and the professional milieu.

What matters more, and what opens up new research questions, is that Czubala's research was carried in the era "before Jan Gross's *Neighbors*", to put it shortly,⁸ and – which is more difficult to problematise – it was carried still in the Polish People's Republic. So – in times when the context of talking about the Holocaust and passing it over in silence (as well as interpreting talk/silence) – and particularly about "witnessing" it directly – was not shaped by the public debate around the neighbours' crime in Jedwabne and all of its ramifications, up to the institutional backlash in the form of actions by the Polish League against Defamation and the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in Markowa, amongst others.

It would be an unjustified oversimplification to contrast the "authenticity" of testimonies from Czubala's volume with the "inauthenticity" of oral histories gathered much later by Anna Bikont during her work on *The Crime and the Silence* (2004) (Bikont, 2015), or by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir during her research that led to the publication of *Legenda o krwi: Antropologia przesądu* [Blood Libel: The Anthropology of a Superstition] (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008), to mention just these exemplary works. And yet, it seems important to ask about the details that make sources published in these works differ. In particular, about the difference between the modes of linking motifs and facts these books depict, as well as the modes of silent passing over the facts, which include various "pacts of silence". What is "anthropologically constant" in these works, and what is historically, territorially and situationally variable?

In order for such comparisons to make sense, we need to take into account the previously characterised, unique position of Czubala in relation to the researched world: a very close one, almost integral. It is extraordinary even in ethnographic studies and oral history, let alone historical or sociological research. Again, this offers no guarantee of authenticity, but makes familiarity and spontaneity much more probable, as well as uncontrolled openness and honesty. There is also the "distance to the events" of these "memorial accounts". It is not necessarily the case that the closer the events, the more a "witness" can remember and communicate,⁹ but oral histories recorded by Czubala thirty or forty years after the war reflected the memories of the older generation, so consequentially the content of memory was possibly different from oral histories recorded during the recent twenty years.

These are just a set of my preliminary suggestions of questions and research problems stemming from the reading of *We Are not Allowed to Speak about It...* This work is likely worth reading above all as a substantial starting point for historical studies on

8 On the fundamental importance of this watershed moment for the formatting of vernacular memory – as something of counter-memory in relation to the mainstream narrative – see the excellent, brief analysis: Kaczmarek, 2015.

9 For a perspicacious perspective on this widespread illusion see: Jedlicki, 1978.

the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations in the geographical area researched by Czubala. However, I suggest looking at this book also as a mediator between ethnography/anthropology – oral history – studies on memory/forgetting – as well as, obviously, factographic history of the Holocaust, but also practical philosophy of history (of the Holocaust). A very handy mediator it is: the book is small, visually inconspicuous, published almost in a notebook format. It is also very modest, featuring a withdrawn and dispersed voice of collective authorship. A book in which no figure of authority will tell us how it really was, and will not impose ways of relating that knowledge to other similar findings, or ways of situating it in epistemic structures, “discourses”, or current disputes.

Instead, we are offered a selection of sources in which nearly 150 people convince us, with their speech and silence alike, how it was – between “in general” and most minuscule details. Still, the shift between these levels is not necessarily gentle and fluid, and sometimes happens to be steep and surprising. This is the case especially in stories about helping Jews and keeping them in hiding, when an account of micro-factographic actions is struggling to overcome the generalised “how it was” of the represented world. Silence at times serves as a strategy of overcoming that generalised rule, although at other times happens to powerfully confirm it. Therefore, each time a silence appears, it requires a thorough *ex silentio* interpretation, whose direction is not prompted by any external narrator with a greater knowledge.

The view is foggy from a distance. Yet, we are given a good set of tools to get closer and clarify it independently. Tools allowing less to write yet another micro-history of the Holocaust, but rather to examine more carefully how that history *worked*, how it unfolded dramatically between myths and facts. And how difficult it was for facts to break free from the power of myths.

This source-based (philosophy of the) history of the Holocaust is worth tapping into.

Translated by Łukasz Mojsak

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Historia mówiona jako wybór źródeł. Wokół „O tym nie wolno mówić...” Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali

Abstrakt: Recenzja książki „O tym nie wolno mówić...” Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali, wybór i opracowanie Piotr Grochowski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, Toruń 2019, s. 236.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Dionizjusz Czubala; Zagłada; pamięć; źródła historyczne; historia mówiona; etnografia; wywoływanie źródeł



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