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# The Bystander Complex: The Holocaust in Relation to Peasant Witnesses

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The category of the Polish witness to the Holocaust has recently become the subject of striking research, diagnosing its awkwardness, unsuitability or insufficiency as an instrument to describe the attitudes of Polish society toward the Holocaust. These studies are dominated mainly by revisionist concepts with a stake in both revising Polish culture's long-maintained self-image of martyrdom, as well as unmasking Poles' various forms of involvement in the extermination process targeting Jews. A noteworthy study that stands out is the research of Maryla Hopfinger's research team, reconstructing how Polish narratives of the Holocaust have been shaped, beginning as far back as the 1940s, along with what is viewed as the lead figure of the witness as outsider and indifferent observer.[1] Her findings correspond with the

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1 See *Zagłada w „Medalionach" Zofii Nałkowskiej. Teksty i konteksty* [The Holocaust in Zofia Nałkowska's *Medallions*: Texts and contexts], ed. Tomasz Żukowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2016); *Opowieść o niewinności. Kategoria świadka Zagłady w kulturze polskiej (1942–2015)* [A story of innocence: the category of Holocaust witness in Polish culture: 1942–2015], ed. Maryla Hopfinger and Tomasz Żukowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018); *Lata czterdzieste. Początki polskiej narracji o Zagładzie* [The

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work of Tomasz Żukowski, who investigates mechanisms of "retouching" in Polish self-image, visible in cultural texts and their reception.[2] Another figure who returns to the issue of the formative meaning of the position of witnessing the Holocaust – that is of being placed in sight of violence – is Grzegorz Niziołek, who in his pioneering study "Polish Theater of the Holocaust" analyzes the consequences of collective denial of the experience of seeing the Holocaust for the shape of Polish cultural identity.[3]

The various perspectives on reconceptualizing the "Polish Holocaust witness" seem linked by a basic terminological dilemma: whether it is justified to use the very concept of "witness" – which in Holocaust discourse is mainly reserved for Jewish survivors – in the context of Polish experience.[4] Taking this recognition as their point of departure, Elżbieta Janicka and Ryszard Nycz, in an implicit polemic, formulate two separate approaches that, combined, mark out two main lines of thought about Poles' attitude regarding the Holocaust. On the one hand, Janicka proposes rejecting the category of "witness," which, in her opinion, connotates an objective and disengaged perspective, therefore allowing Polish society to be situated outside the field of violence playing out between perpetrators (Germans) and victims (Jews). As such, this becomes an argument fetishized in public discourse and one that upholds the myth of Polish innocence. Yet the attitude and behavior of the Christian majority created a socio-cultural framework that conditioned the situation of Jews at every stage of the Holocaust – not only in its final phase, but also during the period of ghettoization and mass

forties: the beginnings of Polish Holocaust narrative], ed. Maryla Hopfinger and Tomasz Żukowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2019).

2 Tomasz Żukowski, *Wielki retusz. Jak zapomnieliśmy, że Polacy zabijali Żydów* [The great retouching: how we forgot that Poles killed Jews] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018); Żukowski, *Pod presją. Co mówią o Zagładzie ci, którym odbieramy głos* [Under pressure: What those whose voices we take away say about the Holocaust] (Warszawa: Wielka Litera, 2021). Cf. Bożena Keff, *Strażnicy fatum. Literatura dekad powojennych o Zagładzie, Polakach i Żydach. Dyskurs publiczny wobec antysemityzmu* [Guardians of fate: Literature of the post-war decades on the Holocaust, Poles and Jews: Public discourse on anti-semitism] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2020).

3 Grzegorz Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady* [Polish theater of the Holocaust] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013).

4 Polish does not possess the (useful) distinction that exists in English between "witness" and "bystander." In the Polish translation of Raul Hilberg's *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*, the translator Jerzy Giebułtowski proposed, for the author's chosen term "bystander," the familiar Polish term "świadek," meaning "witness." This translation choice seems to reflect well the aforementioned terminological difficulty.

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extermination. Therefore, as Janicka shows, Polish society also held a position toward the Holocaust of "participant observers."[5] On the other hand, Nycz – while conscious of the hesitations expressed toward the category of witness – remains an advocate for it. He sees Jan Błoński's gesture, in his essay "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto" [Poor Poles look at the ghetto], of separating out the witness as a research category to be fundamental to today's discussions of the Polish witness of the Holocaust. Nycz also claims, contrary to Janicka, that this gesture has made it possible to situate Polish society within (and not outside) the extermination process. It also indicates the potential of the witness category as a figure with agency, constituting themselves in a position of inclination toward another person or who – to put it another way – makes the experience of another into part of his or her own "self." To be a witness means experiencing a situation of entanglement in what – as Nycz puts it – has become shared, while "what we share – unlike a 'participation' that presumes an intentional choice, a conscious decision, engagement – we do not want nor do we choose, yet we must acknowledge, take responsibility for, because it is part of the reality we live in […]."[6] This perspective directs our attention toward those attitudes situated on an axis between assisting and murdering Jews, attitudes that are therefore more difficult to classify unambiguously by only considering the dimension of action (or the renunciation thereof).

Regarding this divergence in thinking about the "Polish Holocaust witness," illustrated by the juxtaposition Janicka and Nycz's diagnoses, I take an intermediary position. I claim that the experience of a "third party," as was the role of Polish society during the Holocaust, qualifies the co-dependency of both positions – both of "bystander" and of "witness." The position of bystander is situational and contextual, meaning that a person becomes

5 See Elżbieta Janicka, "Obserwatorzy uczestniczący i inne kategorie. O nowy paradygmat opisu polskiego kontekstu Zagłady" [Participant observers and other categories: On a new paradigm of describing the Polish context of the Holocaust], in *Świadek: jak się staje, czym jest?*, ed. Agnieszka Dauksza and Karolina Koprowska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2019), 32–60. A similar point of departure comes from Roma Sendyka, who adapts the English term "bystander" into Polish and proposes translating it as "postronny" ("outsider"). See Sendyka, *Od świadków do postronnych. Kategoria bystander i analiza podmiotów uwikłanych* [From witnesses to outsiders: The category of bystander and analyzing entangled subjects], in *Świadek: jak się staje, czym jest*, 61–82. I write more on this subject in the book: *Postronni? Zagłada w relacjach chłopskich świadków* [Bystanders? The Holocaust in peasant witness accounts] (Kraków: Universitas, 2018).

6 Ryszard Nycz, "*My, świadkowie…*" [We, the witnesses], in *Świadek: jak się staje, czym jest*, 137–150.

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a bystander as a result of a defined event taking place in direct proximity.[7] Meanwhile, witnessing is based on the intersection of experience and articulation – a witness is therefore one who has not only experienced something and has a certain knowledge of it, but also can in some way (verbally or extra-verbally) express this experience.[8] In this sense, the condition of bystander is conditioned by existential happenstance, since it emerges more from inadvertently finding oneself within the scope of events than from conscious individual choice. The condition of witness meanwhile indicates a perspective of potentiality; this means the bystander may become a witness, if they themselves offer testimony of their internal and external experience or if they are called to present such.[9]

I am inclined to accept these propositions because of a selection of research material in the form of peasant accounts of the Holocaust. In this article I utilize two collections of sources: firstly – pieces submitted to the "Descriptions of my Village" contest, organized in the first half of 1948 by the Czytelnik Press Institute,[10] and secondly – oral histories collected and recorded by Dionizjusz Czubala in his ethnographic research in the 1970s and 80s.[11] These accounts are vestigial, fragmentary, and full of gaps and oblique statements, often illustrating

7 Mary Fulbrook proposes a similar definition of bystander. See Mary Fulbrook, *A Small Town near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

8 Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 15.

9 For more on the context of interrogating the process of witnessing, see Agnieszka Dauksza, "Ustanawianie świadka" [Establishing a witness], in *Świadek: jak się staje, czym jest*, 164–197.

10 See Krystyna Kersten and Tomasz Szarota, *Wieś Polska 1939–1948* [The Polish village 1939–1945], vols. I–IV (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967–1977). In preparing this text I have used both this edited version as well as – inasmuch as was possible – the original materials collected in the PAN Institute of History. In citations from the publication I give the volume number, reference number and page; from excerpts of original accounts, only the reference number and, if applicable, the page number.

11 See Dionizjusz Czubala, *O tym nie wolno mówić... Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali* [We can't talk about that... The Holocaust in oral histories from the collections of Dionizjusz Czubala], sel. and ed. Piotr Grochowski (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2019). Another source preserving the peasant perspective on the Holocaust are the materials from the August Trials, used by Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking. See Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Barbara Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* [It's such a beautiful, sunny day... The fates of Jews seeking aid in the Polish countryside 1942–1945] (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011).

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the effort of articulating the difficult memory of the Holocaust. Yet they provide an account of the experience of rural bystanders delivered from a peasant perspective and conveyed in a peasant voice – and as such they are a valuable source that allows us to research how peasant witnesses characterize their position toward the Holocaust. The texts analyzed here are distinguished by their provenance – the contest materials are written accounts, while the ethnographic materials are a record of oral histories and conversations. At the same time we can treat them as commissioned sources – in the first case, for the sake of an advertised contest, in the second, by an ethnographer taking on the role of a mediator of memory, who makes witnessing possible.

## The Local Dimension of the Holocaust

The specificity of peasant bystander experience is influenced by the local context of the Holocaust, taking place in close socio-topographic surroundings. Spatial proximity turns the inhabited surroundings into a dynamic field of violence, involving everyone within it in different ways. Therefore I also propose examining the position of peasant bystanders – as well as how we understand their involvement in the process of the Holocaust – in relation to the concept of the neighborhood. From an anthropological perspective, this is defined as the space of life, action and experience, as created by human settlement practices. Tim Ingold points out the constitutive significance of an inhabitant's activities in shaping their living environment, by describing the neighborhood as a taskscape, meaning an agglomeration of interlinked actions or tasks undertaken in a defined space.[12] The neighborhood is not limited merely to its physical and ecological configuration, but also encompasses a whole string of social, cultural, affective and sensory contexts. In this conception, the bystander becomes "a local," meaning one who functions in the surrounding environment and whose activity co-creates it; meanwhile, these activities derive their meaning from the inhabited place. The local dimension of the Holocaust as it occurred in the countryside therefore formats the outside involvement of peasant bystanders, which results from both their intentional actions and their very presence at the events (i.e. ending up in one situation and not another), which becomes the source of various affective stimuli.

12 Beata Frydryczak, *Krajobraz. Od estetyki the picturesque do doświadczenia topograficznego* [Landscape: From the aesthetics of the picturesque to topographic experience] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2013); Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," in Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Oxford: Routledge, 2000), 189–208.

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Peasant accounts convey a sense of entanglement in what is taking place in their nearest surroundings and what then becomes the object of their experiences. In one of the contest's "descriptions of my village," the author portrays the time of the occupation as a prolonged condition of anomy, in which not only were all sorts of moral principles suspended, but the boundaries of the safe space of familiarity were also constantly disrupted by wandering refugees bringing potential danger, such as partisans, Russian POWs or Jews:

> A few months after the Germans came in, divisions of Polish partisans started to turn up. After the outbreak of war with Russia, Russian refugees from German captivity appeared. Jews, tormented by the Germans all over the cities, partially armed themselves and fled to the forest and of course into the village. […] Russians and Jews needed to clothe and feed themselves in the village; the partisans also often abused their power, and bandits went robbing. At that time we got a literal Sodom and Gomorrah in the village. When night fell, everyone would get the shivers, because it was hard to predict who'd come visiting and what laws they would dictate. (WP, vol. III, no. 105[1535]: 169)

In wartime conditions, the closeness experienced in the countryside and the directness of these accounts form the main source of mutual tensions, intensifying uncertainty, fear and suspicion. The feeling of being entangled in the Holocaust is similarly visible in an oral history from Miernów, taken from the collections of Dionizjusz Czubala:

> All over the village, they hid like that, they hid. There was Jews at Rusiecki's, and here, yeah, at Adamczyk's. That's what people said, there was Jews. But who saw 'em? Who showed their face? All at night, they didn't go out in daytime. Nobody knew, they kept 'em secret. […] The Jews wasn't scared, I mean, we knew them Jews from Wiślica. We did, we called 'em bakers, them that came here, they was familiar. Once they knew they come rollin' into the stable, and they brought others along too. They kept sayin': "Come on, lock up. [We're staying – author's note] by the road, if them Germans [came – K. K.] they'd take us an' kill us," they said. "Nah… They [won't – K. K.] kill us… Get some sleep and get out of here," my boys [sons – K. K.] often laughed, "and sure enough, they get some sleep and get out into the fields."[13]

Both of the accounts cited here allow us to distinguish two main groups of Jews seeking refuge in the countryside: Jews from the cities, and local Jews,

13 The Polish transcription maintains the speaker's rural dialect, which is hard to preserve in English translation. Czubala, *O tym nie wolno mówić…*, 80.

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who were born and/or lived in the village and small-town neighborhood. Being oriented in the local topography and local relations allowed the latter a certain freedom in organizing hiding places and greater ease in maintaining contact with Polish inhabitants.[14] From the perspective of one woman living in Miernów, familiar Jews were marked out by great agency: they were not hidden, but were hiding (the aid they were given was ephemeral in nature and consisted of being allowed to spend the night); they were therefore taken as less of a threat, while their survival was "someone else's problem."[15] In truth, their hiding involves the entire village – the speaker emphasizes that Jews were "hid[ing] all over the village," meaning spending a little time with everyone. At the same time one might get the impression that the diffuse nature of the help freed bystanders from a feeling of responsibility, distancing them, as it were, (on a psychological level) from the Jewish refugees. The cited statement also shows such an attitude is additionally supported by the topsy-turvy mechanism of wartime, according to which mutual relations are structured by the principle of invisibility (both sides accept that those in hiding lead a nocturnal lifestyle). On the basis of these diagnoses, rural bystanders can be characterized using a dialectic of closeness and distance, showing a basic tension between closeness to (peasant) Polish and Jewish fates (in respect to space) on the one hand, and the attempt to maintain distance (in respect to experience) on the other.

## "It Happens Before My Eyes…"

Peasant bystanders – as their stories show – experienced the proximity of the Holocaust influenced both by widespread knowledge of what was going on in the neighborhood, and also by direct somatic-sensory experiences that permitted them to recognize the field of violence. In their accounts, formulations like "we all knew about it"[16] recur again and again. With regard to the closed circulation of knowledge typical in rural society, knowledge of Jews hiding in the area or of extermination activities was universally available: either passed on within neighborly or familial circles, or supposed, guessed at, on the basis of rumors overheard or of one's own suspicions. Peasant bystanders also

14 For more, see Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień*, 50–52.

15 See Marek Czyżewski, Kinga Dunin and Andrzej Piotrowski, *Cudze problemy. O ważności tego, co nieważne. Analiza dyskursu publicznego w Polsce* [Someone else's problem: On the importance of what's unimportant, an analysis of public discourse in Poland] (Warszawa: Łośgraf, 2010).

16 Czubala, *O tym nie wolno mówić…*, 76.

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learned about the course of the Holocaust by identifying topographical traces and changes to the landscape.

They also confronted deadly events directly, which Feliks Tych considers a specific dimension of Holocaust witnessing in the countryside. As he emphasizes: "perception of the Holocaust is one thing for witnesses from large towns and cities, and another in small ones and villages, where the Holocaust or portions of it were carried out as a rule before the eyes of the local Polish population and it was impossible not to notice."[17] Peasant bystanders defined their own attitude toward extermination activities most often by referring to looking, seeing or observing: "I saw it, the German killed [the Jewish woman – K. K.] before my eyes. [...] [I]t happens before my eyes."[18] People who found themselves in the vicinity of an execution of Jews emphasize: "So I was looking at it," "I saw it, I was there at the time,"[19] "I was living up there on the little hill, I look, they're leading that Jewish woman along. And him, that Abram – Abram he was called – they killed him in the pasture, right from a rifle."[20] Peasant witnesses, in commenting on their own position relative to the event they are describing, referred to the visual context to legitimize their telling, to confirm the truth of the experience they were conveying: "They was leadin' 'em out, against the wall and shot 'em in the back of the head. It was older Jews. The young'uns got taken away and these'uns got left behind. Well I saw it. [...] This rich Jew's one lady, they nabbed 'er too. [...] Sure enough, I saw it an' heard it. She was askin': 'Mister Hunc, please, let them still see the world'."[21]

Yet the above quote shows that in the rural context, sight is not the only instrument situating bystanders within the Holocaust, but instead it

17 Feliks Tych, *Długi cień Zagłady. Szkice historyczne* [The long shadow of the Holocaust: Historical sketches] (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1999), 24. Cf. Jan Tomasz Gross, " 'Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej...', ale go nie lubię" ["This one is from my homeland..." But I don't like him], in Gross, *Upiorna dekada. Eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców, komunistów i kolaboracji 1939–1948*, new edition, corrected and expanded (Kraków: Austeria, 2007), 44.

18 Czubala, *O tym nie wolno mówić...,* 68.

19 Both excerpts: Ibid., 73.

20 Ibid., 111. Notable in this account is the speaker's citation of the name of the murdered Jewish man (in peasant oral histories, victims are most often anonymous). The speaker does not directly identify the perpetrators of this crime, but this story is preceded by the words: "And there were these partisans, too, who were shooting Jews, and the [collaborationist – K. K.] police."

21 Ibid., 72.

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co-exists with others, creating a neighborhood of sensory experiences,[22] which are perceived as symptoms of extermination. Here, memories of olfactory impressions predominate: "in late spring or summer you can't smell anything except the stench of burning bodies" (WP, ref. no. 1461), "They burned millions of Jews here from all over Europe. When the wind was coming from Sobibór you could smell an acrid stench like burning horn" (WP, ref. no. 295), or aural ones: "from morning to evening, packs of a few hundred SS dogs would be howling" (WP, ref. no. 1461). Sounds and smells intrude, reach bystanders from the outside, evoking a sense of danger and constant proximity to death. In another account from Nowy Korczyn, we find a striking dependency between what is heard and what is seen. Hearing gunshots leads to the necessity of seeing their results: "A German military policeman was leading along this elegantly dressed gentleman and this little girl. In a moment, gunshots. I race there to see if it's possible; after all, they were just alive. I look, and there in a ditch, the man is lying in a puddle of blood, and that girl further along. Only then did I grasp it…"[23] The attitude of the bystander depicted in this account establishes the intentionality of the gaze (which is meant to confirm the alleged crime). It also seems that this action additionally motivates a behavioral imperative that overtakes reflexivity and awareness of the macabre sight.

Another influence on peasant witnesses' experiences, as determined by the topographic and sensory proximity of the Holocaust taking place in the neighborhood, is what was felt affectively and corporeally. In their accounts, some speakers evoke memories of the emotions or somatic reactions that the sight of another person's suffering and another person's death provoked in them. This is how one speaker talks about the extermination of the Jews in his village:

> Well and the awful day finally arrived, it started to drizzle a little in the east. And now the Germans and Ukrainians had surrounded Okrzeja with automatic weapons. They chased everyone onto the market square, because that's what we call the middle of our village, with the big square. […] Then they told them to lie face-down on the ground; once they'd laid down on the ground, then a single collective moan went up, a horrible moan, as if from the grave, from underground, until something tightened inside, sending shivers all over a person standing to one side. (WP, vol. III, no. 106[1437]: 172)

22 For more on sensory perception of the landscape, see John Urry and Phil Macnaghten, "Sensing Nature," in Urry and Macnaghten, *Contested Natures* (New York: SAGE, 1999).

23 Czubala, *O tym nie wolno mówić…*, 81.

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"A person standing to one side" here describes only the bystander's place in the spatial system, for in a corporeal and affective respect they situate themselves within the event. The Jews' suffering affects them internally (they feel an internal tightening and shivers on their body). The moaning of Jews sentenced to die, horrible and nearly apocalyptic, seem in this story to materialize, to become nothing but a moan – "single" and "collective" – which, as it were, separates itself from those emitting it. Attempting to capture the intensity and horror of this moan, the author situates its source in the earth, in the grave – this overwhelming sound therefore now comes from the underworld, from people already dead.

## Activity in the Neighborhood

Villagers became bystanders by performing concrete tasks for the Germans, facilitating both their oversight of the rural community and the processes of exterminating Jews and expulsion operations. Finding oneself in the role of assistant stemmed from the Nazi-initiated means of organizing rural society, based on authorities such as a village council chairperson, police officer or volunteer fire department chief, who were distinguished by their degree of responsibility for the collective. Villagers were selected (usually by a village council chair carrying out a German command) for specific tasks, for example they were to provide horses and carts for deporting Jews, join night guards or village watches that were launched after the deportations and were meant to defend the village "from bandits and vagrants," which in reality meant capturing Jews hiding in rural areas; they could also be chosen as "community hostages," using their lives to guarantee the success of "Jew hunts," or village couriers who (when there was no telephone in the village) delivered information to the police station.[24] Another activity involving peasants in the Holocaust was burying the corpses of Jewish victims, usually at the scene of the murder.

Peasant bystanders perceived active participation in the Holocaust – on the one hand – as contrary to their own convictions; they felt forced into a morally ambivalent position, making them share responsibility for the extermination of the Jews. But on the other hand, the imposed role of assistant gave opportunities to seize the initiative and permitted independent action leading to the death of Jews, such as denunciation or committing murder. Here it is worth emphasizing that an essential factor in bystanders taking on the role of perpetrators was often feuds between Polish inhabitants. In Czubala's collection we can find accounts showing that one factor motivating

24 See Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 71–86.

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denunciations of peasants concealing Jews was the desire for revenge.[25] Bystanders' various motivations and ways of acting permit us more precisely to investigate the following excerpt from the recollections of a woman from the village of Stoczek:

> The year 1942 brought the mass destruction of the Jews. One September morning, it was still gray out, the German military police and soldiers surrounded the settlement the Jews had been driven into from several townships, and a mass roundup started. They used help from the Volunteer Fire Department, which skillfully assisted the Germans. The tormented Jewish population was beaten, tortured, poured over with water, kicked. Most were deported that very day to Treblinka, and the few who escaped were slowly caught and shot in the local Jewish cemetery. Not only Germans, but Poles also threw themselves into looting Jewish possessions. Some Poles, after capturing a Jew hiding out somewhere, not only stripped them of their gold and clothing, but even young Jewish ladies of their honor, and only afterward did they hand them over to the Germans. Others promised to conceal them for large sums, and after taking everything from them, gave them to the Germans. There were also some who didn't want anything from the Jews, but did not they want to hide them either, which the Jews did not hold against them. (Ref. no. 847: 4)

In her account, the speaker describes the operation of capturing and deporting Jews as the shared activity of Germans and ethnic Poles, the specific character of which is revealed in one sentence of this story: "They used help from the Volunteer Fire Department, which skillfully assisted the Germans."[26] The participation of peasant assistants (and particularly the fire department) is based on the fundamental paradox of compulsion and free will – they acted on German orders (they were "used" for help), which at the same time does not exclude their spontaneous and unforced activity ("skillful assistance").[27] In

25 Czubala, *O tym nie wolno mówić…*, 109, 121.

26 It is worth mentioning that the excerpt of the cited account in the edition of Krystyna Kersten and Tomasz Szarota is shortened right in the middle of this sentence (due to the year of publication we can guess at the influence of censorship or self-censorship). Information about voluntary activity by bystanders in the countryside is thereby erased, and the story is kept in the mode of justification and limiting the participation of peasants in the Holocaust.

27 From testimony and materials from the August Trials, we know of events indicating the voluntary action of local Volunteer Fire Departments in capturing Jews. Tadeusz Markiel (an eyewitness) and Alina Skibińska tell the story of the shocking act of torturing and murdering local Jews in Gniewczyn, initiated by firefighters. See Markiel, Skibińska, "*Jakie*

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portraying the specific actions of participants in the event, the speaker uses two verb forms: the impersonal, when she speaks of attacks of beating, torture and murdering Jews (e.g. "The tormented Jewish population was beaten, tortured, poured over with water, kicked," "Most were deported," "were slowly caught and shot in the local Jewish cemetery") and personal, when she is describing the plunder of Jewish possessions and the handing over of Jews. It seems that the involvement of bystanders is in this way differentiated and nuanced: that of the fire department taking part in direct violent attacks infringing the boundaries of life, that of peasant looters violating dignity, and also that of those who wished to remain in a neutral position (who refused to help and did not loot). Behind stripping Jews of their gold and clothes, raping Jewish women and handing them over to Germans, there is permission for those captured to suffer and a belief in their inevitable deaths, ultimately dealt to them by another subject hidden behind the impersonal forms. In a narrative like this one, responsibility for ending Jews' lives is muddied, perpetration remains unspoken and unnamed.

## Peasant Memory of the Holocaust – Features

Based on analysis of peasant narratives we can formulate several primary conclusions typical of peasant memory of the Holocaust. Firstly, it is a memory of the initiated, mainly exchanged in private or among neighbors and family. The only people who have access to it are those who share the secret (i.e. have available specific knowledge of the event that took place in their neighborhood, or have preserved in their memory a recollection of what they took part in), or those who make the effort to resurrect the pass and have been allowed into the secret of the past.[28] Secondly, memory of the Holocaust is not the collective and community memory of the countryside, but shared memory, for it does not influence the creation of group identity (in that it is not sustained in public discourse or for the sake of collective commemorative rituals). Nonetheless it

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*to ma znaczenie, czy zrobili to z chciwości?" Zagłada domu Trynczerów* ["What difference does it make if they did it out of greed?" The massacre of the Trynczer household] (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011).

28 Here it is worth mentioning the particular position of Dionizjusz Czubala, who started collecting stories about the Holocaust with the inhabitants of the village where he was born. Since he was playing more the role of a "one of ours" than an ethnographer, he found it easier to gain the trust of his interlocutors. Antoni Sułek writes similarly about this process when he comments on his research in his home region in the countryside, referring to himself as a "researcher-local": "In this area I'm 'one of ours' – I'm a person from there, but at the same time a professor of the University of Warsaw." See Antoni Sułek, "Badacz i świadek drugiej generacji. O ratowaniu lokalnej pamięci zagłady Żydów" [Researcher and witness of the second generation: on rescuing local memory of the Holocaust], *Więź* 4 (2017).

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is a type of memory constellation for individual members of the village community, a collection of memories they share because these memories belong to events that took place in the neighborhood, and in which the villagers themselves were present as bystanders. Invoking Jeffrey K. Olick's two concepts of collective memory, we might say that memory of the Holocaust in the countryside situates itself in the order of "collected memory," not "collective memory."[29] Thirdly, this memory focuses around experiences of proximity to death, tightly linked with the rural topography. Accounts are dominated by recollections of macabre events: executions, mass murders, manhunts or uncovering hiding places. This local dimension of the Holocaust influences the spatial conditioning of memory and the placement of these recollections in the rural landscape.

*Translated by Sean Gasper Bye*

## Abstract

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*The Bystander Complex: The Holocaust in Relation to Peasant Witnesses*

The article investigates experience of Polish peasants during the Holocaust in relation to two categories of "bystander" and of "witness." The author analyzes two collections of peasants' narratives: firstly – pieces submitted to the "Descriptions of my Village" contest, organized in the first half of 1948 by the Czytelnik Press Institute, and secondly – oral histories collected and recorded by Dionizjusz Czubala in his ethnographic research in the 1970s and 80s. It is emphasized that the specificity of peasant bystander experience is influenced by the local context of the Holocaust, taking place in close socio-topographic surroundings. The author focuses on peasants' various forms of involvement in the extermination process as well as on their memory of the Holocaust.

## Keywords

peasant bystander, witness, Holocaust, village

29 See Maria Kobielska, "Pamięć zbiorowa w centrum nowoczesności. Ujęcie Jeffreya K. Olicka" [Collective Memory in the Center of Modernity: Jeffrey K. Olick's Concept], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2010): 181. See Joanna Wawrzyniak, "Pamięć zbiorowa" [Collective memory], in *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci*, ed. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska and Robert Traba, coll. Joanna Kalicka (Warszawa: Scholar, 2014), 346–350.

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