

POSTMEMORY OF KILLINGS IN THE WOODS AT DĘBRZYNA (1945–46): A POSTSECULAR ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This article applies a methodology developed within the framework of postsecular anthropology to a case study based on field material collected in 2015–2017 in and around Przeworsk, a town in the region of Subcarpathia in south-eastern Poland. The collected material documents the current post-memory of atrocities committed in the Dębrzyna forest in 1945–46. The killings were perpetrated in a turbulent period that followed World War II, which can be described, following Zaremba, as a time of “Great Fear”, or Agamben’s term “state of exception”. At the time, some members of the local population formed gangs to commit assaults and robberies against forced labourers returning to their homeland from Germany (or from the West generally). According to my respondents, many such assaults resulted in deaths. Homeless, socially unmoored and unprotected by law, the victims were reduced to the status of a purely biological “bare life”. My article will show how the victims of those events are commemorated, and how the post-memory of those events finds its expression today. My interpretive tools are based primarily on selected postsecular theories. In this context I apply the categories of *ontological penumbra* and *counterpoint* to identify those instances where religion finds itself compelled to rely on secular diction out of a sense of powerlessness and inability to use the religious idiom for articulating problematic ideas related to suffering.

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Artykuł stanowi próbę zastosowania warsztatu wypracowanego na gruncie antropologii postsekularnej do badań nad konkretnym materiałem terenowym, zebrany w latach 2015–2017 w leżącym na Podkarpaciu Przeworsku i jego okolicach. Materiał ten dokumentuje współczesny stan postpamięci mordów, dokonywanych w lesie Dębrzyna w latach 1945–46, w warunkach powojennego zamętu, który można za Zarembą nazwać czasem Wielkiej Trwogi, lub za Agambenem „stanem wyjątkowym”. Miejscowe bandy w celach rabunkowych napadały wówczas ludzi wracających z robót z Niemiec (lub w ogóle z Zachodu), co – jak twierdzą rozmówcy – kończyło się ich śmiercią. Osoby te pozbawione domów i więzi wspólnotowych, niechronione przez prawo, były sprowadzane do czystego biologicznego, „nagiego życia”. W artykule pokażę, w jaki sposób ofiary tych wydarzeń są obecnie upamiętniane oraz jak wyrażana jest postpamięć o tamtych wydarzeniach. Narzędzia interpretacyjne będą czerpała przede wszystkim z wybranych teorii postsekularnych. W tym kontekście odniosę się do kategorii „ontologicznego półcienia” oraz kontrapunktu, których używam, by uchwycić momenty, gdy to co religijne odwołuje się do tego co świeckie z poczucia bezsilności wyartykułowania pewnych kłopotliwych, związanych z cierpieniem treści w religijnym idiomie.

Key words: PostSecular Anthropology, *Ontological Penumbra*, *Contaminated Landscape*, *Great Fear*, Subcarpathia

THE POSTSECULAR IDEA OF *ONTOLOGICAL PENUMBRA*

Three years ago, when I began my field research¹ of religious imaginaries in the area of Przeworsk² in Subcarpathia (Polish: Podkarpacie), I did not expect my research there to push my interests towards the connections between religious life and the collective trauma of post-war crime, guilt, and post-memory³. As soon as that research topic presented itself to me, though, I knew that I would analyse those events from the perspective of postsecular anthropology, an approach that views the religious and the secular in a dialectical fashion, as things that continually influence and constitute each other (Merz and Merz 2017, 2; Van der Veer 2014, 151)⁴. They interact with each other in the place named by Johannes and Sharon Merz an “ontological penumbra”⁵ and defined as:

a space where the self and the other, ignorance and certainty, as well as the secular and the religious, meet, overlap, and intertwine. It is a reflexive space of dialogue, encounter and engagement, which is also marked by ambiguity and plurality, as well as creativity and productivity where “the other” includes both human and nonhuman entities who, in turn, need to be recognized as our counterparts (Merz and Merz 2017, 2).

That space of ontological penumbra⁶ is explored and conceptualised by postsecular anthropology, but ultimately it remains evasive and intangible, a moving and changing target that depends on many factors. I regard the term as a useful concept that addresses crucially important phenomena, such as the mystery of human existence or the way existence is experienced in different forms that are engaged in a kind of

¹ Funding for this project came from the National Science Centre in Poland DEC 2013/11/B/HS3/01443.

² Przeworsk is a town in south-eastern Poland, located between Rzeszów and Jarosław in the valley of the river Mleczka close to the Ukrainian border.

³ I define post-memory after Marianne Hirsch as a later generation’s relationship with the individual, collective and cultural trauma of an earlier generation. This relates to ideas about the past which emerge in a mediated form in childhood and adolescence (cf. Hirsch 2012, 5).

⁴ Postsecular anthropology is implicitly focused on the areas between “revealed religion in the dogmatic sense, which compels the individual to obey the sovereign God as lord and master of all creation on the one hand – and the complete erasure of any traces of transcendence (...) which subjects the individual to the imperative and self-sufficient rules of immanence” (Agata Bielik-Robson 2013, 11. All Polish sources are quoted in my translation).

⁵ Obviously, the problem of being per se and the different ways of understanding it has long been part of anthropological reflection in its various epistemological strands including phenomenology, posthumanism, new animism, perspectivism and the “ontological turn”. Michael Scott refers to those collectively as an “anthropology of ontology” (cf. Scott 2013). That area of inquiry goes beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ The postsecular idea of an “ontological penumbra” makes it possible to admit as a kind of ontological possibility what gets implied by social actors that anthropology deals with, namely the spiritual aspects of human existence, and the way those actors regard transcendence (represented by the Demiurge) as something real and actual. “Ontological penumbra” refers to physical and mental space where many entities may coexist in a “real” sense: a meeting point of, and an overlap between, the religious and the secular (cf. Merz and Merz 2017, 12).

dialogue. As such, ontological penumbra contains the experience of nature as being as such (“diverse experiences and understandings of the nature of being itself” [Scott 2013, 859]) and various expressions of that experience. This is a space that cannot be appropriated by any one party, but instead becomes constituted by different and seemingly incompatible modes. The boundaries between those modes are blurred, and no common language is available to arrive at a shared interpretation. Perhaps this kind of language can never be fully embraced as a common, shared resource, but it engenders an attitude of openness to the arguments of the other side in a way that may enrich them both with new elements⁷. In order for this to happen, anthropologists must become reconciled to the idea that we may be dealing not only with different epistemologies, but also with multiple different worlds, even if those worlds are not isolated from each other, and may influence each other in certain ways. It is not merely the case that each individual has a different language to describe the world they co-inhabit with others; in a sense individuals inhabit different worlds that may be slightly, or even completely, different from each other.⁸ This means that anthropology faces the task of developing an epistemological openness to a diversity that is ontological rather than purely terminological, and needs to allow for the existence of nonhuman forms of existence and knowledge.

The concept of ontological penumbra corresponds to the epistemological modesty expressed in the Platonic idea of the cave, where only mere shadows of the forms can be glimpsed. It also dovetails with Paul’s idea of viewing things “in a glass, darkly”. Accordingly, my working assumption is that no complete and precise ontology can ever be articulated; all attempts to do so must remain incomplete and approximate.

Postsecular anthropology feels at home within the reaches of “ontological penumbra”, and views with suspicion all existing epistemological categories (including religion and secularity). It treats fixed traditional meanings that are generally taken for granted as merely a starting point for reflection on those meanings that such terms might be suppressing or concealing, or be completely oblivious of. Those latent meanings become apparent when examined in relationship to phenomena that often seem mutually exclusive by definition, and/or when we reflect on the context of their origin, and the way their interpretations and usage change over time. At the same time we should draw attention to the fact that the language used by postsecular thinkers steers clear of any “strong” terms (such as *God*, *religion* or *secularity*), which they regard as spent forces. Instead, they frequently rely on auxiliary categories, often expressed by means

⁷ This situation could be associated with Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*) which involves “rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other”, and is only possible when we are willing to test our prejudices by confronting them with others, and possibly modifying them (Gadamer in Moran 2002, 336)

⁸ A person who believes in cosmic energies and aliens lives in a different world than an agnostic, even though both can agree on certain statements, such as “everything is made of atoms or waves”.

of neologisms⁹ and metaphors; they realize acutely the complex nature of reality, and avoid essentialist approaches¹⁰. Rather than talk about “God”, they prefer to talk about God’s traces, such as Walther Benjamin’s “dwarf” or the Derridean spectre of Levinas’s *ur-memory* (Drzewiecka 2014, 36); they prefer the term “ontological penumbra” to ontology (Merz and Merz 2017). Thus, in postsecular approaches, “strong” ontological categories become “shadows” of their former selves.

Secularity is one such category that has become deconstructed in postsecular thought¹¹. It is a paradoxical category: even though it appears to exclude all religious elements, secularity is deeply rooted in religion owing to its Western Christian pedigree. Secularity is residual in nature (because it encompasses everything that is not religious), but it is also all-encompassing (it occupies a superordinate position in the system), serving as the point of departure for analysing “religion” (Casanova 2011; Scott 2013, 867). Viewed as self-evident, the category of secularity had long been treated in prescriptive terms in social sciences. This is a mistake: we have only recently come to realise how secularity in practical terms is often entangled in the very religious discourses it tends to deconstruct as a partisan and particularist way of viewing the world (Asad 1993; Keane 1997, Needham 1972, Sahlins 1996). Postsecular anthropologists prefer to look into the genealogy of the category than to provide its definitions.

As a result, postsecular thinkers treat religious elements as a source of meanings which are relevant to the secular sphere of life and vice versa: a source that is no less important for being hidden or repressed, as is often the case. This pushes some adherents of the postsecular turn to look for religious inspirations in what may at first appear to be autonomously secular ideas and values (Asad 2003; Benjamin 1996; Bielik-Robson 2008). To use Walter Benjamin’s image, those “automata” turn out upon closer inspection to be operated from within by a “dwarf” representing theology (Benjamin 1996, 413). Accordingly, anthropologists should be able to deploy theology, a branch of philosophy that had previously remained in an “awkward relationship with their discipline (Robbins 2006; Jenkins 2012, 466; Lubańska 2007; Merz and Merz 2017, 2). This should be done firstly by seeking to identify the theological sources of its terminology, and secondly by exploring those social groups where theology holds sway (Robbins 2006, 286).

⁹ This often results from the fact that anthropology may lack adequate terms to describe a given phenomenon. New meanings get coined as well. My own struggles to identify adequate terms to describe Orthodox Christian religious culture in Bulgaria are a case in point (Lubańska 2014, 2016, 2017).

¹⁰ A careful approach to concepts has characterized anthropology since James Clifford and George Marcus’s publication (1986) that opened up the way to the emergence of a variety of turns within anthropological theory.

¹¹ Secularity became a central modern category – be it theological and philosophical, legal and political, or cultural and anthropological – for construing, codifying, understanding and experiencing the sphere treated as distinct from “religion” (cf. Casanova 2011, 54)

Having said that, I agree with Joel Robbins (2006), Mathew Engelke (2002) and Michael Lambek (2012) that the two disciplines should be kept separate, and I share Jon Bialecki's opinion that in order for such encounters to be fruitful they must be mediated by a shared research problem dictated by the area of research (Bialecki 2018, 157–158). In other words, postsecular anthropology should be prepared to factor in certain theological positions insofar as such positions might be relevant for the purposes of anthropological research.

Certainly one major task for postsecular anthropologists is to keep pushing the limits of academic imagination in order to accommodate new theories and conceptualizations of the world they study, so that those entities and phenomena which were formerly considered impossible can now be presented as real. Merz and Merz believe that this could be achieved by means of forging a kind of alliance between anthropology and theology (2017). I do not believe this solution to be universal, or even sufficient; researchers who believe this are often adherents of one particular theology which they tend to single out as the preferable partner for such alliances¹². But no single "recipe" for an epistemology of postsecular anthropology exists, nor should one exist; more preferable is an interdisciplinary approach, and anything that helps anthropology to retain a pluralistic view of the world and represent those ontologies, epistemologies or embodiments that might get overshadowed by the dominant approaches. Where some categories have become secularised¹³ to a point where their meanings have become fuzzy and diffuse, it is a good idea to reinvigorate them by using theological concepts¹⁴. And conversely, where such concepts become too enmeshed within a particular theology they need to be modified using inspiration from some other theology, philosophy or even natural science¹⁵. In other words, anthropologists should not be engaging in apologetics with regard to various theologies or philosophies. Instead, they should be engaged in efforts to revise some of their epistemological axioms (Lubańska 2013; Lubańska and Ładykowska 2013). I agree with McLennan that postsecular thought is not anti-secular, but rather intra-secular (McLennan 2010, 19), however it does not take secularity for granted, and realises the need to be open to religious influence (Habermas 2006; Taylor 2007, 20).

¹² Incidentally, I find it surprising that Mertz and Mertz (2017) make no reference to an existing current within anthropology that openly draws on a specific religion, namely Islamic anthropology, represented by the eminent anthropologist Akber Ahmed (2013).

¹³ To become dogmas that became rooted too deeply in their own tradition, as it were sapping it of vitality.

¹⁴ The idea is not to transpose them faithfully onto anthropology, but rather to adapt them in creative ways. The idea is not to inject theology into anthropology but to add an anthropological dimension to terms and concepts borrowed from theology.

¹⁵ The post-humanist and postsecular turns share some epistemological insights, primarily an openness to exploring human and non-human relations, with non-humans being respectively defined as elements of the natural world or spiritual entities).

This realisation does away with Durkheim's sociocentrism¹⁶ along with some of its biases, including the idea of a clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane in the social world, and distances us from the theories of religion proposed in the social sciences as having a protestant bias¹⁷ (Asad 1993).

In this sense postsecular anthropology continuously queries the borderlines between religion and secularity in those societies that have experienced secularisation: where are those borderlines located, who put them there, and for what purpose (Asad 2003)? At the same time it recognizes that religion – or theology – have value and deserve to be nurtured in a secular world, and given room in public life¹⁸ (Habermas 2006, 3). And, in a move that I personally find particularly interesting, postsecular anthropology takes note of any surprising juxtapositions between the religious and the secular, and explores their causes.

If we anthropologists become reconciled with the idea that the relationship between religion and secularity is a dialectical one, I believe our attention in postsecular societies should turn to a search for those places, incidents, statements or situations where social actors who identify with secularity nonetheless make use of religious language for one reason or another, and conversely, those who identify with a religious outlook choose to use secular language. In both cases the idea is to say something that will not only be fitting in the circumstances, but will also move beyond the familiar schema¹⁹. The aim is to achieve an expression original enough to trigger emotion in the listeners, and to rekindle the potential to experience the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* (Otto 1958). Such situations occur frequently in those cases where a sense of insufficiency or “wanting” is experienced along with a feeling of horror provoked by some incident or the emotions it elicits.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS SUFFERING AND RESEARCH INTO SECULARITY AND RELIGION

In this article I propose a postsecular approach where the postsecular situation is defined as an instant where that which is religious draws on secular language out of a sense of helplessness stemming from an inability to articulate certain problematic

¹⁶ This arguably found its most radical expression in Milbank, who argues that the persuasive potential of sociology in explaining religion is predicated on its latent quasi-theological character (Milbank 2006, 96).

¹⁷ Notably, Asad deconstructed the protestant bias in the last anthropological definition of religion with universal ambitions formulated by Clifford Geertz (1993).

¹⁸ In the institutional sphere Habermas postulates a translation of religious categories to secular ones; in public life a generally complementary process whereby believers can learn from non-believers and vice versa (2012, 122–124). At the same time Habermas sees in religion a unique capability to articulate certain socially beneficial ideas concerning moral sensitivity and solidaristic intuitions (cf. Habermas 2012).

¹⁹ Either in a way that is more full and precise or, conversely, more vague and ambiguous.

ideas related to suffering in a specifically religious idiom – and vice versa. This move augments the power of expression and emotional impact of such statements in a way that brings to mind the contrapuntal effects of a musical fugue. Like counterpoint, it seeks to achieve the maximum expression in order to produce a sense of ecstasy in the listener. The counterpoint theme may appear to be different from the main melody, but what it does is bring it out more fully. In the context of post-modernity, with its Weberian “disenchantment”, it seems to me that counterpoints and metaphors are those means of expression that furnish a meeting point for the ostensibly separate secular and religious modes. Whereas metaphorical tropes are more popular with intellectual elites, the counterpoint is more egalitarian. It occurs in different contexts, initiated by different social actors. It is tangible, a form of cultural expression that may be captured and described – a kind of the embodiment of postsecularity²⁰ treated as a social phenomenon.

In my understanding of this phenomenon, where meaning becomes complemented by its “counterpoint”, my assumption is that believers sometimes realize that religious language fails in certain situations, and rely on secular language instead to achieve a new quality of some kind. At the same time this intuitive need to use such a “contrapuntal” expressive trope appears to stem from a desire to “re-enchant” the world, a longing that manifests itself in modern society in a variety of ways. This desire is difficult to fulfil because modern Western societies lack what Charles Taylor calls *naïveté* (Taylor 2007, 21). As a result, such re-enchantment inevitably entails an element of doubt; this ontological penumbra, and the counterpoint it leads to, combine to produce an event where the subject can finally feel comfortable.

This is why I fully agree with Talal Asad’s observation that secularity and religion can be studied indirectly in anthropological terms by examining the phenomenon of people’s relationship with suffering as something tangible, palpable, a thing that becomes conceptualised in different ways in secular and religious narratives, respectively (Asad 2011, 658). In support of this Asad argues that, firstly, “pain is associated with religious subjectivity and often regarded as inimical to reason” (Asad 2003, 67), and secondly that “pain in the sense of suffering [...] is thought of as a human condition that secular agency must eliminate universally” (2003, 67). At the same time secular and religious beliefs about suffering are often different. Secular narratives generally regard suffering as something that deprives people of full agency in the world, but also as the “the most immediate sign of this-world” (Asad 2003, 68), or the most powerful way to experience reality. Pain is viewed as an influence on subjects/

²⁰ Postsecularism is an epistemological position, whereas postsecularity denotes certain undefined and ambiguous manifestations of practices and ideas that constitute postsecularism. Whereas postsecularism belongs to the realm of ideas, postsecularity relates to phenomena. I was inspired to differentiate between those concepts by Michał Warchała’s paper, delivered during a conference on *The Experience of Faith in Slavic Cultures and Literatures in the Context of Postsecular Thought*, Warsaw, 16–17 October 2017.

agency that is “external and repressive”²¹ (Asad 2003, 71). Religious narratives, on the other hand, seek to find some added value in suffering; for instance, *passion* (in its etymological sense of suffering) can be viewed as a condition in which transcendence can manifest itself²². According to Asad, one of the aims of secularity is to gradually eliminate suffering from human life, and to replace it with pleasure (cf. 2014, 68). In my opinion, this tendency is also on the rise in modern religious practices²³. For this reason, the secular and the religious understanding of suffering (where I view both as “ideal categories” of a sort) are so different from each other. At the level of actual social practice the two categories obviously mix, and neither can be found in a pure form. The interesting question in anthropological terms is whether a community relies on secular or perhaps religious frameworks of interpretation to name the social practices involved in a given case.

In his essay, Asad notes that we tend to think of sufferers as being passive, a conclusion that stems from the assumption that pain must be an external and objectifying force that can only be yielded to (2003, 73, 79). Asad believes we would be better off if we changed this one-sided understanding of suffering, and looked at pain as something that the experiencing subject can actively engage with and attempt to tame or bring under control (2003, 79). On the other hand, he notes that suffering is not a private experience: pain is entangled with human relationships, and must be recognised as such (2003, 81–2). This is why it is possible both to participate in another person’s suffering, and to refuse to accept it as real (2008, 82). In order to communicate one’s suffering we need not only a suitable language but also a public willing to listen (2003, 83). In this sense there is a social dimension to suffering, where pain creates the conditions for certain social experiences to even exist (2003, 85).

In the subsequent part of this article I will look at attitudes held by a community in Subcarpathia with regard to suffering that afflicted people in post-war Poland as

²¹ Taking into account the experience of pain and suffering, as well as subjective wants and desires, Asad makes important corrections to the anthropological concept of the category of agency, which forms the centrepiece of his article.

²² One distinctive case in point is the phenomenon of healing masses organized by charismatic movements, during which the priest may list the various body parts and diseases about to be healed by the Holy Spirit.

²³ This is a simplification. Firstly, eastern Christianity differs in accentuating Christ’s transfiguration (*teleiosis*) on Mount Tabor rather than his death on the cross. Secondly, the image of God as a healer who wants human wellbeing is gaining strength in western Christianity; in this perspective, suffering caused by illness is treated as a symptom of spiritual imbalance, or interference from evil spirits. Asad likewise references the changing attitude towards suffering in western Christianity (2003, 106). In the context of postsecular reflection we might add that those changes are also symptomatic of an overlap between the secular and religious perspectives on this problem. Perhaps under the influence of certain secular ideas, Christianity foregrounds and suitably interprets the relevant aspects in the gospels which were previously underrepresented.

they lost their homes, became unmoored from social ties or government protection and lost their political status and legal personhood in a way that reduced them to bare biological life. Hannah Arendt writes in the same context about the “abstract nakedness of being human” (Arendt 1973, 299), a fate experienced by the survivors of death camps and concentration camps, or stateless individuals. In this “state of exception”²⁴ they frequently fell victim to assault and murder initiated by gangs convinced of their own impunity. This situation will be discussed in the second section of my article. My main interest is to examine the language and postures with which a community actively or passively implicated in those atrocities defines its attitude towards the victims’ suffering. I will also seek to restore some of the individual dimension of the victims’ suffering, and to discuss the painful trauma experienced by several generations in a community trapped in the post-memory of those events.

In my discussion of the problem I will be relying on Giorgio Agamben’s reflections on bare life / “homo sacer”²⁵ as interpretive tropes for my analysis. Also relevant will be references to research focused on the Shoah since that event (as I make clear in the second part of the text) was in many ways paradigmatic for the conclusions I draw from research on atrocities committed against people returning to Poland in 1945–1946 after surviving the turmoil of a world war. Those atrocities were committed by robbers who formed gangs in the region of Przeworsk, Poland. Lastly, this text is an attempt to adapt the methodology of postsecular research to my field material.

THE POST-WAR PERIOD AND THE ZONE OF “ONTOLOGICAL PENUMBRA”

My analysis is based on ethnographic field research conducted in 2015–2017 in the villages of Grzęska and Świętoniowa located close to the forest of Dębrzyna, and in the town of Przeworsk (where I interviewed some former inhabitants of Grzęska and Świętoniowa). This source material was obtained during field expeditions, where I was recognizable as a researcher as a result of my involvement in a 2017 film documentary entitled “Nie sądzić” (*Not to Judge*) directed by Pawlina Carlucci Sforza and myself, which contains references to the atrocities committed in the Dębrzyna forest²⁶. Public

²⁴ I borrow this category from Agamben. I provide a more detailed explanation later on in the article.

²⁵ See my discussion in the source material section.

²⁶ The documentary was an element of a research methodology based on collaborating with notable members of the local community. A collaboration between an ethnographer, artist and local figures, the film was a response to the local problems caused by unprocessed trauma. The documentary offers a postsecular metaphorical interpretation of the condition of the victims, encouraging reflection and hopefully offering a point of departure for deeper inquiries in the future. The film was also a way of reaching descendants of witnesses of the murders at Dębrzyna. I agree with psychoanalysts that repressed images have a way of “secretly swelling up” (cf. Steinlauf 2001, 12), causing a negative impact on human psyche and leaving a mark on the life of the community in question.



Photo 1. Tracks in Grzęska; in the background at Dębrzyna. 25.11.2017. Author: M. Lubańska.

screenings of that documentary were held at Przeworsk²⁷, accompanied by debates featuring people appearing in the film, members of the audience, and representatives of local media. It was only possible for the events to be narrated in the film thanks to cooperation between the main characters appearing in the documentary and the filmmakers.

The documentary interweaves preparations taking place in the run up to a production of an Easter mystery play with narratives of the atrocities committed in the area during and after the World War II, as narrated by two of the actors appearing in the mystery play, Henryk Prochowski (playing Jesus, privately a library director in Przeworsk) and Piotr Kucab (playing Judas). The former told me about the dramatic events that took place in 1945–1946 at Dębrzyna (Photograph 1) abutting the villages of Grzęska and Świętoniowa.

At that time former camp inmates and slave labourers were returning from Nazi Germany to Poland. Most of the returnees were Polish, though some were also Ukrainian. Among them were Jews too. Many treated the town of Przeworsk as the final

²⁷ The first one was held on 3 September 2017 following a screening of the documentary in the cinema room of the culture centre at Przeworsk, and involved some 30 participants. A second discussion, with over a dozen participants, was held on 25 November 2017 in the municipal library at Przeworsk, also following a screening of the documentary.

train destination en route to the local villages where they had lived previously²⁸. Rail connections were irregular, and the people travelled in freight cars, packed inside or sitting on roofs. Many never reached the homes. Between Rogóżno and Grzęska, some people would get pulled out of the trains near a siding built by the German occupying force, taken into the forest, and murdered.

Who were the perpetrators? What made them commit these murders? Who were the victims? How is it possible that the atrocities went on for two years but that the perpetrators were never held to account, and that the victims remain nameless? How come we still do not know the exact number of victims?

Those questions probably cannot be answered conclusively; the events at Dębrzyzna have so far escaped the attention of historians and social researchers. There are only several articles in the local press²⁹, some written after the screening of the film documentary³⁰. There is a reference to the atrocities in *Budy łańcuckie. Rys monograficzno-historyczny* (2006), a local history book by Franciszek Kielbicki who argues that the murderers were acting in disguise, masquerading as members of Poland's wartime resistance movement known as the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK). More information can be found in the archives of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN)³¹, indicating that an investigation into the atrocities was launched in the 1950s by the communist secret police (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa)³², but that no charges were brought to court. The relevant files contain witness accounts from 1947 onwards (the case was closed in 1956). Names of some of the suspected murderers appear in *Obwód Przeworsk SZP-ZWZ-AK w latach 1939–44/56* (2009), a book by Teodor Gaşiorowski published by the Institute of National Remembrance.

The individuals named in that book were never brought to court, and therefore must be presumed innocent. Many fled the country and emigrated to England. Some migrated to the so-called "Recovered Territories", i.e. pre-war German provinces that became part of Poland after World War II. This is confirmed by my respondents:

Some of the murderers left the area because they were ashamed to look people in the eye (...) Maybe in their heart of hearts they lament this (female respondents, group interview, Grzęska, September 2017).

²⁸ Such as *Budy łańcuckie*, *Gniewczyzna* or *Gorliczyzna*.

²⁹ By Jacek Szwic (*Życie Podkarpackie* 29.10.2017), Kamil Jacek Zarański (*Życie Podkarpackie* 15.04.2015), Barbara Chmura *Kto pomoże dotrzeć do świadka mrocznych wydarzeń sprzed 70 lat?* (05.11.2016) and Janusz Motyka, *Ten las jest przesiąknięty śmiercią*, available at Nowiny24.pl (10.07.2010).

³⁰ Kamińska M. 2017, Wielki sukces filmu „Nie sądzić”. *Supernowości* 24 (21 September 2017, online edition; <http://supernowosci24.pl/wieki-sukces-filmu-nie-sadzic/> accessed 27.12.2017); Żak W. 2017. Film nie sądzić wywołał falę dyskusji (8 September 2017, online edition: <http://www.jaroslawska.pl/artykul/14356>, Film-Nie-sadzic-wywolal-fale-diskusji (accessed 27.12.2017).

³¹ In this article I rely on IPN file RZ 061/424.

³² I reference those materials with caution, and I'm currently fact-checking the material in the file. I will generally only refer to passages independently corroborated by my respondents. I will devote more attention to this secondary material in my upcoming book.

Like my respondents, I will not be naming any names in this article. Instead, I will provide some background information and, to the extent this is possible, I will try to reconstruct some of the circumstances that made it possible for the group to have acted with impunity, and be shielded by the local community to this day.

Lying dormant until the 1990s, the memory of those events is defective, patchy and scattered³³. Some of the information I have been given about the violent gang at Dębrzyna contains internal inconsistencies, and all of it was difficult to come by. Over seventy years after the events in question they remain shrouded in what the locals self-describe as a “conspiracy of silence”³⁴ so effective that the intergenerational transmission of tradition had broken down for a period of many years (interestingly, this applies to families of perpetrators and witnesses alike).

Władysław was the only person to come clean and shake off the burden. There was also another one who talked, Józef. “But we don’t know the names”, she would say but that’s not true, everybody knows the names. However, if the first generation told the second generation, but the second generation then didn’t, those grandchildren have no idea that their grandparents were murderers. What kind of mum would tell her children, my dad, your grandad, was a local murderer?! (female respondent in her 60s, Przeworsk, September 2017)

Another important role is played by those surviving members of the second generation who eavesdropped on adult conversations as children, and vividly remember the details. When those respondents open up, their narratives contain a wealth of vivid details and evocative descriptions, even though those are (probably intentionally) decontextualised to a point where no description or social profile of the murderous gang can be reconstructed by the researcher. In those conversations the topic would quickly get changed, making it very laborious to get to the bottom of the crucial facts.

When queried about the killings, local inhabitants kept silent or ended the conversation quickly. They were unwilling to discuss those events because they related to “our folk”, i.e. neighbours:

Those gangs that assaulted people on their way back from slave labour, it was our folk that did that. Our people³⁵ did that in those places. People did that sort of thing to other people. We were like a cradle for those gangs (female respondent, ca. 75 years old, Grzęska, September 2017)

³³ This confirms the comment from Hirsch that “[p]ostmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch 2012, 5).

³⁴ The documentary uses a device where a link is established between each of the victims at Dębrzyna and Christ’s Via Dolorosa. The idea was, among others, to elicit responses about the murders from people appearing in the film. A creative medium like film made it easier for them to break from the strategy of silence socially imposed over several generations, triggered by the shame of belonging to a community tainted by murder, but also a sense of loyalty towards innocent descendants threatened by stigmatization. It was also intended to highlight the parallel between the victims and the injunction in the Gospel of Mark, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Mt 25, 40).

³⁵ According to some respondents the gang also included men from Urzejowice, Gorliczyna and Studzian.

This reticence largely comes from respecting the feelings of the murderers' descendants who, as my respondents point out, "are not to blame", and possibly know nothing about those events:

"If that was my grandfather, murdering people or something, how can I be held responsible for his sins?!" (female respondents, group interview, Grzęska, September 2017)

At the end of the day those descendants are neighbours, or even relatives. Talking about the murderers would ruin relationships, and amount to informing on others.

Individuals from those gangs later married girls. A girl might have been unwilling to marry one of them but she had no choice, he'd just pump her head full of lead and that would have been the end of her (female respondent, ca. 75 years old, Grzęska)

This is the countryside. The relationships here are all different. Everybody knows everything about everybody else. This kind of shameful acts from the past get swept under the carpet, or people keep mum about the whole thing out of kindness (female respondent, ca. 50 years old, Świętoniowa, September 2017).

Some of the locals are still concerned about potential fallout from reporting on the events. One female respondent told me she'd much rather not discuss the subject for fear of a family member³⁶ losing his or her job. Another respondent told me that a man who sought to publicize the problem received a threatening letter. More than seventy years after the atrocities were committed, the conspiracy of silence continues. Some members of the community have kept silent because they believe it would be wrong and stigmatising to associate the local villages with nothing but those events of long ago:

In spite of everything I'm proud to have been born at Świętoniowa, because that chapter in our history is just one of many. Local people also kept Jews safe in hiding [during the Nazi occupation], people did things that were more or less heroic, and I don't view that film as an indictment. I'm glad people have engaged with this problem. We all need to look from the perspective of time at what we've been unable to cope with. Difficult problems are not always easy to tackle (female respondent, ca. 50 years old, Przeworsk, September 2017).

Many of my respondents claimed that the bandits had once been partisans, members of the Home Army³⁷ who "became degenerates" (*wynaturzyli się*) when their commander left the area to hide from the communist secret police. Some said that the men were Railroad Guards, a uniformed formation of Polish railroad police. The material from IPN (AIPN RZ 061/424) confirms the connections with the Home Army and with the railroad police. The suspects identified in those files were men aged 20 to 35, many of whom were related. My interviews also confirm that most of the bandits came from Grzęska (8–10 men), with several others from Świętoniowa. The IPN

³⁶ To protect the respondent's anonymity the exact nature of that family relationship is withheld.

³⁷ This is corroborated by witness accounts in the IPN file RZ 061/424.

investigation files contain many more names (there are some discrepancies between different depositions), including people from other villages in the area.

Some of my respondents argue the bandits could not have been partisans since a local Home Army unit had plans to deal with the gang but then had to flee the area. They took advantage of their official capacity as railroad policemen to stop trains, and to get some of the passengers off the train, ostensibly to have their papers checked. Then the passengers would be taken into the woods,³⁸ robbed of their belongings, and killed. The archival source material contains a deposition that confirms this account given by my respondents:

(...) Their methods for committing robberies were barbarous, generally speaking they'd go about it like this. People were returning from Germany, preferably with freight transports because normal rules applied on passenger trains. Once they spotted somebody with suitcases or bundles, anything they could steal, they would stop that person and take them to Dębrzyna for a police investigation. They pretended to be the police and conducted a sham investigation... They would ask the victim if they were Polish or Ukrainian. If they said Polish, they would pretend to be Bandera's men [UPA], and if they said Ukrainian they pretended to be armed Polish police (source, informant "Kowal", deposition taken by Adam Typer, 29.08³⁹)⁴⁰.

They didn't bury those people in graves, like we do today, they just chucked them into a ditch and covered them with branches (female respondent, group interview, Grzęska, Sept. 2017)

Some of my respondents claimed that the perpetrators had been desensitised to death and killing during World War II; most argued the reverse was true: "those who fought in the war did not turn into bandits later". My respondents also claimed that the perpetrators had already committed assaults and robberies during the war, robbing even the inhabitants of Grzęska or Świętoniowa, but that people were afraid to report them. The murders had apparently begun during the war, as I show later in my article in the story of the killing of a Jewish family in Grzęska. Most of my respondents claim that robbery was the motive for murdering people returning from Germany, though some are convinced that the killers killed for the addictive thrill of it:

The most terrible thing is, my father told me that so I think it's true, the most terrible thing is that the people who committed those terrible murders didn't stand to gain anything from the killings. They were deluded in believing that returning slave labourers had anything of value. Most of them had maybe a spoon with them, or a chipped mug, or a plate. That was all. They had nothing. So you might say robbery wasn't the actual motive behind the killings. If you kill one guy who has almost nothing, and then another, then that's just degeneracy on the part of those people (female respondent, ca. 50 years old, Przeworsk, Sept. 2017)

³⁸ A forest is arguably a perfect landscape for "concealing a crime" (Małczyński 2009, 209). Similar to Bełżec, trees became "inadvertent participants" in the crime (Małczyński 2009, 209). I will explore this idea further in a separate article.

³⁹ Possibly a misreading: the number denoting the month is blurred in the original.

⁴⁰ AIPN Rz 061/424

You know, they didn't wait to [mercy] kill the man, when they shot him they didn't wait for him to stop breathing, they just shot him up and left (female respondent, ca. 75 years old, Grzęska, September 2017)

Stories of the murderers' cruelty can also be found in the witness depositions contained in AIPN Rz 061/424:

They were investigating one person, and they tied him by the neck to a spruce tree with a piece of wire which they tightened behind the tree with a stick. They strangled the man, and they bungled his burial, one of his legs was sticking out of the ground (source: "Kowal", deposition taken by Adam Typer, 29.08.1954⁴¹).

Some bodies were left unburied, and what burials did take place were hasty, make-shift affairs. In some of the accounts I heard stories of local inhabitants of Grzęska and Świętoniowa coming to bury bodies (sometimes at night), and finding human remains for many years afterwards:

Murders were committed by neighbours, they killed to avoid recognition. It was gruesome. They lay by the ditch, nobody was willing to give them a burial (male respondent, ca. 65 years old, Przeworsk, Sept. 2017)

One of my female respondents, who lived by the woods in the 1960s, told me she had often seen bones lying on the forest floor as a child but assumed those were animal bones. The gruesome realisation came to her years later:

Over time, as you get older and you get that image in front of your eyes – because I can still see those images – you realise that animals are shaped differently, the shape is different, right?! (female respondent, ca. 65 years old, Grzęska, November 2017)

When some of the local inhabitants gave burials to the abandoned bodies they did this furtively, and kept no record of the victims' identity. Some of the bodies were only covered with a thin layer of soil, and were later torn apart by animals. Some of my respondents said that the burials were sometimes handled too late, when the smell of decay in the forest made everyday life unbearable.

What I found particularly shocking in those accounts was the passivity and indifference of the inhabitants of Grzęska and Świętoniowa with regard to the victims' suffering:

To my knowledge there were entire gangs here who kept people here and committed grisly murders. People here strung up from trees, on barbed wire. Those people spent several days in painful agony. Sometimes children who were herding cattle near the forest, as children did back then, **heard the groans of the dying people but everybody was too scared to go there**. Everybody was scared. In some cases where people were brave enough to discuss those things, organized gangs of people came at night, and I never heard of actual executions but I know they were threatened quite unambiguously (female respondent ca. 50 years old, Przeworsk, Sept. 2017).

⁴¹ Possibly a misreading: the number denoting the month is blurred in the original.



Photo 2. Crosses commemorating the anonymous victims in the woods at Dębrzyna. 03.03.2018.
Author: M. Lubańska.

This passage shows how the post-memory of the murders in the forest is inconvenient to the local community, probably because of a sense of collective guilt. It also shows that the inhabitants were aware of the murders but did nothing to stop them. The argument from the respondents is that saving a victim who knew his or her aggressors would have put the rescuer at risk; everybody in the village was afraid of the bandits. One respondent told me:

When I asked my brother “who committed the murders at Dębrzyna?” he would say, “Why do you need to know that?! You might accidentally blab a name and get in trouble yourself.” So I don’t know those people’s names, and I couldn’t tell you either. (male respondent, 86 years old, Przeworsk, Sept. 2017).

Nobody would say anything because they were fearing for their lives (female respondent in her mid-80s, Grzęska, Nov. 2017).

That was never the subject of conversation (female respondent, ca. 75 years old, Grzęska, Nov. 2017).

Some historical background is required to gain a better understanding of this problem. The violent gang at Dębrzyna was not an isolated incident. In Subcarpathia,

the post-war period (until as late as 1953) meant a constant threat to life and property. As Marcin Zaremba, author of *Wielka trwoga*⁴² [The Great Fear] points out, looting⁴³ was endemic at the time (Zaremba 2016, 25). This was particularly true for major transportation routes, affecting “people pressed into slave labour, prisoners of war and camp inmates” returning from Germany to Poland (Zaremba 2016, 162, my translation)⁴⁴. Tomasz Bereza, an IPN historian in Rzeszów, writes that post-war acts of violence were partly the effect of moral devastation caused by the cheapening of human life in an environment where people were desensitised to death, had an easy access to firearms, and faced grinding poverty (2013, 91). Bereza notes that the problem was particularly acute “in communities located away from administrative centres and situated in the immediate vicinity of woodland areas” (Bereza 2013, 91, my translation). According to Bereza, this problem remains under-researched in the literature (Bereza 2013, 91, my translation).

This means that the atrocities at Dębrzyna took place during a period of political and logistical turmoil, insecurity and poverty; a time when the new structures of power were only just emerging⁴⁵. Accordingly, terms “Great Fear” and, “state of exception”, appear to describe that period accurately. Some of my respondents tended to relativize moral judgements about those past events. A young woman in one of the local villages insisted that anyone would be capable of similar atrocities under certain circumstances. That may be the case, however, I share the opinion of some of my respondents that although some circumstances can make moral wrongs understandable, they nonetheless cannot absolve the perpetrators of moral responsibility. This should be borne in mind as we raise difficult questions, such as, to what extent was the local community co-responsible for the murders? What’s particularly interesting from the anthropological point of view is how those events are accounted for and explained within the community. Despite some differences of opinion, some of my respondents rejected a relativizing approach to morality:

We can wonder about this, and argue that those were different times, but the nature of a time reflects the nature of the people, and not necessarily the other way around. I think you can try and explain all kinds of things, but unfortunately crime is still crime (female respondent, ca. 50 years old, Świątoniowa, Sept. 2017).

⁴² Zaremba took this term after Georges Lefebvre, who had used it to explain the atmosphere of peasant riots in France just before the French Revolution of 1789 (Zaremba 2012, 15).

⁴³ Looting was mainly done by Soviet troops, but also by Poles. On many occasions surviving underground Polish units of the Home Army and other outfits (Bataliony Chłopskie, Narodowe Siły Zbrojne) also became looting gangs (Zaremba 2016, 211).

⁴⁴ Looting of Jewish property by those military formations is also mentioned by Joann Tokarska-Bakir in *Okrzyki pogromowe* (2012, 51).

⁴⁵ According to Zaremba, “in 1945 there was a shortage of independent figures of authority as well as local, judiciary and economic institutional authorities” (2016, 101).

In this context it appears that the Christian idea of loving one's neighbour does not apply: fear for one's own life suspends its operation. Which is perhaps why it is doubly worthwhile describing the attitudes of those people who found the inner strength to stand up against the murderous practices, and showed that resistance was possible. One of my respondents, Władysław, told me about a woman who accosted the gang to rescue a potential victim:

Hey, you over there, where do you think you're going with that woman? If you want to kill her then you'll have to kill me as well (Władysław, ca. 90 years old, Przeworsk, March 2016).

As a kind of sombre counterbalance, another account mentioned a bandit who failed to recognize his own brother in the dark, and killed him in the woods:

Yesterday my dad told me about a case where a man killed his own brother at Dębrzyna, they were in league with a guy, and at night they would pull people down from the [train car] roof. They took his bundle, and the next day the *sołtys* [village leader] called people from the village to bury the bodies. He took some of the farmers with him, if there are bodies lying around you need to bury them. That's when the man recognised his own brother. Buried him as well. A man killed his own brother for a bundle without knowing it... (male respondent in his mid-60s, Przeworsk, Sept. 2017).

Featuring in those narratives is the major problem of divine punishment, which serves as a touchstone to reveal religious attitudes. In those respondents' opinions the settling of accounts with the murderers ultimately lies with God, who can forgive or condemn the perpetrators:

At first there was fear, but then those people became useful. For instance, one joined a music band and played at weddings⁴⁶. The terrible times were over, people wanted entertainment, they wanted to get married, and a music band was useful. **I remember him playing music at weddings, he was a funny guy, just an absolute dear!** (they all knew but nobody said anything). That was the guy whose wife left him, she just went her way. He was alone for the rest of his life. And that's how he died⁴⁷, well, it made many people think that "God's mills grind slowly", the phrase just came to mind (female respondents, group interview, Grzęska, Sept. 2017).

I heard repeated stories about that man. Another female respondent told me the following:

It happened some years ago – there was this well-groomed elderly man, quite nice actually, very gentlemanly, he lived at Świętoniowa and wore beautiful jackboots. He got killed by a train some dozen years ago. It was an accident, an ordinary accident. People were saying, he'd been part of that crowd who stopped the trains, and history had come full circle. Who are we to judge? (female respondent, ca. 50 years old, Przeworsk, Sept. 2017)

⁴⁶ My respondents were relatively more willing to discuss his case because he died childless, and was reputed to have been involved in the stopping of the trains but not in the killings.

⁴⁷ The man was killed by a train. I will discuss the idea of "divine retribution" (along with many other problems that go beyond the scope of a single article) in my upcoming book.

Importantly, some of the respondents lay the blame for the events on the forest itself, and not just on the historical circumstances that produced the “state of exception”⁴⁸:

There’s some kind of power there, they say it’s an evil power, some sort of energy power, and that evil attracts evil people (male respondent, ca. 65 years old, Przeworsk, Nov. 2017)

To my mind, the way blame for the suffering of the victims gets shifted onto the forest indicates that feelings of guilt become externalised and projected on the natural world (in this case the supposedly haunted forest).

In terms of people’s attitudes towards the forest, older respondents (now in their late 70s and early 80s)⁴⁹ often mentioned the fact that they did not like the place, that it brought back unpleasant associations, and that it seemed ominous. One respondent from this age-group told me that when he was a child, parents discouraged their children from visiting the forest, saying, “Kids, never visit that forest if you want to live” (ca. 85 years old, Przeworsk). One respondent remembered a time when the forest still belonged to the aristocratic Lubomirski family, and was fenced off from the village with a high fence. That respondent felt nostalgic about the place, reminiscing about fascinating nature classes they had had there, looking at interesting plants that no longer grow in the forest.

People in their fifties tend to have mixed feelings about the forest, but positive emotions predominate. The forest was a peaceful place when they were growing up, and they were simply unaware of its dark past. There were several graves in the forest but nobody told the children who was buried in them – some assumed it was unknown soldiers. One of my female respondents told me that the forest teemed with life when she was a child, and she spent all her free time there. I heard similar accounts from other people who treated the forest primarily as a place where they could play, and “knew nothing” about the darker aspects.

Those of my respondents who did find out about the atrocities recall the experience as rather traumatic. One of the women told me that when she was a child a female neighbour who was with her had swept some leaves aside with a spade, and pointed to skulls buried underneath:

With those leaves and sticks it didn’t take a lot of digging, crunch, crunch, maybe three spades deep. I looked and saw an arm, then I saw a leg. I say, “Why are you showing this to me?” “So that you know what happened here!” (female respondents, group interview, Grzęska, Sept. 2017).

⁴⁸ I suspect that in order to understand the post-war relations in those villages it will be necessary to explore the conflicts between two different underground military formations, the Home Army and Bataliony Chłopskie. I will explore this in my upcoming book.

⁴⁹ I also met one respondent who still remembered the forest at an earlier time, when it was still owned by the aristocratic Lubomirski family. A local teacher would take her pupils to the forest to study plants. Despite having encountered a murdered victim in the forest, the respondent still felt nostalgic about the place.

In this case the intention was clearly to make the events known to the child. Out of the people who had direct contact with the remains of the victims, Władysław is particularly notable. He is a man in his 80s who has repeatedly spoken publicly about the murders committed in the forest, and went so far as to request a formal enquiry from the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). He had learnt about the events as a teenager by accident when he found a naked, decomposing body in the forest on his way back from his student lodgings at Przeworsk. Perhaps it was that direct encounter with actual human remains that gave him a lasting impulse to testify about the human suffering that took place in the forest. Władysław is one of the few locals with a sense of a mission, and at one point he actually distributed leaflets with a newspaper clipping about the murders at Dębrzyna. He appeared in the film documentary to talk about the murders, and identified one of the locations where bodies of the victims are buried. Inhabitants of Grzęska and Świętoniowa acknowledge that his attitude is brave and unique, but not many are willing to follow his example.

The fate of the local Jewish community appears to be an interesting aspect of accounts of the murders at Dębrzyna. In the early 1940s the local Jewish community became the first group whom the Nazi authorities deemed to be “unworthy of life” (*Lebensunwertes Leben*) and they were “taken outside of the pale of humanity” (Czapliński 2017, 10, my translation).

Several times in this context I heard comparisons between “the shameful history” of Dębrzyna and the story of the killing of Jews perpetrated in the neighbouring Gniewczyna Łańcucka, as described in a book by Tadeusz Markiel and Alina Skibińska (2011). As it turns out, quite a number of my respondents were familiar with the book, and were shocked by it. Many drew parallels between the suffering of the Jews murdered at Gniewczyna and the suffering of the non-Jews murdered at Dębrzyna.

Not far from here, at Gniewczyna, there was a case of murders committed against Jews, that secret, too, was revealed by one person on his deathbed. Years later a lad who had seen those events with his own eyes decided to come clean and reveal **the secret that weighed heavily on his heart**, how Polish guards would kill local Jews in that place, and that story came to light. But the shameful story of Świętoniowa is unknown to this day (female respondents, group interview, Grzęska, Sept. 2017).

The way my respondents see it, the fates of the murdered Jews and Poles get intertwined to a point where the murders at Dębrzyna become a sort of continuation of the deaths of Jews murdered in this region of Poland⁵⁰. Nazi propaganda efforts to

⁵⁰ Sławomir Kaprański, who some 25 years ago was researching the memory of the Jewish population of Subcarpathia, writes that “the interviews contained, on the one hand, fantastic and almost mythological elements that could not have referred to any actual events in the past, but on the other hand our respondents steered clear of certain topics of which they must have been aware” (Kaprański 2016, 347). I have a similar reaction to my interviews about the murders at Dębrzyna. In this case the reticence cannot be put down to anti-Semitism or the specifically Polish cultural frame of reference that conditions Polish thinking about the Jews (Kaprański 2016, 347; Tokarska-Bakir 2004; Janicka 2014/2015, 169).

dehumanise Jews, a policy later implemented in heinous ways, effectively devalued all human life. I get the impression that my respondents were aware of that and I was not surprised when one respondent, a woman in her 70s, told me that gangs had been active in the area robbing and killing local Jews even before the killings at Dębrzyna began:

Round these parts around the shambles⁵¹, that's what we called it, there were Jews, Habram, Nukhim and Siunka. That's where they were living in hiding. He was a very rich man, Habram was, Nukhim was his son, and some children. And there were some gangs who assaulted them, because those Jews were rich, they had a lot of property on their estate. And those gangs that formed, they coveted that money. They would come to those neighbours in broad daylight, not far from where they lived, and just took whatever they needed, a cow, or maybe a pig. And one evening, or maybe it was night, when these here... Those gangs made a frightful assault against the Jews, and I don't know what happened, maybe those Jews were trying to get away but couldn't outrun them, but in any case one of those Jewish women was trying to escape with her child. She cried salt tears, begging them to spare her life. There used to be a wooden cross here, it's made of metal today, and they shot her dead next to that cross. Whether Nukhim or Habram were killed, that I don't know. But in any case this is where they killed that Jewish woman. It wasn't the army, it was our local people, from the secret police (UB)⁵² (female respondents, group interview, Grzęska, Sept. 2017).

What the stories of Poles killed at Dębrzyna and Jews murdered locally have in common is that neither group enjoyed legal protection and could be killed by anyone. Their lives did not appear “sacred” to the perpetrators, and the murderers got away unpunished. Those are the precise characteristics that Agamben identifies about the *homo sacer*, an enigmatic figure in Roman law⁵³ denoting a person who stands apart from the community and can be killed by anyone (Agamben 1998, 47), “outside both human and divine law” (Agamben 1998, 48); in his discussion of the *homo sacer* Agamben references directly the Jews exterminated during World War II (Agamben 1998, 68). In the case under discussion here, the term *homo sacer* should be interpreted after

When discussing the Shoah, Kapralski's respondents would make references to anti-Semitic motifs, making it seem like they ran an anti-Semitic cultural code when “compelled to engage with those events” (Kapralski 2016, 352). Kapralski tries to avoid determinism in his treatment of that code, and prefers to talk about “cultural codes that become activated in certain circumstances” rather than permanent cultural dispositions (Kapralski 2016, 348). My case seems problematic because the community in question cannot fall back on a readymade cultural pattern, and has no cultural models available to salvage its own good image, say, by blaming the victims. Murders of Ukrainians in Subcarpathia can be explained away as retaliation for UPA sympathies and revanchist claims, murders of Jews may get justified by alleged collaboration with the secret police or accusations of ritual murder, but there is no way to blame Poles who were former slave labourers in Nazi Germany on their way back home. No cultural framework in this case will serve to dehumanize or otherwise antagonize the victims.

⁵¹ The local name for a part of the village of Grzęska where a slaughterhouse was once located.

⁵² Although there are reasons to believe that some members of the gangs joined the communist secret police (UB) after the war, they could not have been members at the early date referred to by my respondents.

⁵³ According to Kerényi, the Roman figure of *homo sacer* was sacred because he was already the rightful property of the subterranean gods and hence could not be sacrificed (Agamben 2008, 103).

Fowler, who draws a parallel between the Latin concept of *sacer* and taboo. *Sacer esto* is in fact a curse; anyone accursed to become a *homo sacer* was a banned man, a (dangerous) taboo person (Fowler 1920, 17–23, cited in Agamben 1998, 51).

Jews hiding in the houses of their Christian neighbours, as well as people returning from slave labour, were all banned people. That may have been caused by the hateful dispensations of Nazi authorities, but the murderers viewed the victims anyway as people who could be legitimately robbed of life⁵⁴. Agamben also refers to this figure, using the term “bare life”. Although the philosopher uses this phrase metaphorically to refer to instances of physical maltreatment, such as stripping people naked or decapitating them (both of which took place at Dębrzyna), the underlying intuitive idea was to strip the victims of a unique identity and create a “bare life” (*vita nuda*).

Once it was used to create *vita nuda*, the forest effectively became a “contaminated landscape”⁵⁵ containing human remains which are un-commemorated and consigned to oblivion (Pollack 2014, 19). According to some of the respondents, “[t]hose things were scattered all over the forest” (female respondent, ca. 70 years old, Sept. 2017). The trees growing in the area, “eco-witnesses” of the killings⁵⁶ (Domańska⁵⁷ 2017, 49; Smykowski 2017, 74) containing organic remains of the victims, are also their first “living monuments”⁵⁸ (Małczyński 2009, 213).

At Dębrzyna there are no individual graves⁵⁹, and no names appear on the memorial. Human post-memory only retains nameless murder victims – abandoned bare lives – and jumbled up human bones under a thin layer of moss and topsoil. The memory of their lives remains forever unfixd. With very few exceptions, my respondents did

⁵⁴ Because he exists outside of penal codes or sacrificial laws, the *homo sacer* “presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted” (Agamben 1998, 53).

⁵⁵ *Kontaminierte Landschaften* – I borrow this term from Martin Pollack, who uses it to describe landscapes that witnessed mass murder perpetrated in secret, away from human dwellings, where efforts were made to obscure all traces of the crime (cf. Pollack 2014, 15). When I presented an early version of this article as a paper at a conference on The Experience of Faith in Slavic Cultures and Literatures in the Context of Postsecular Thought” (17.10.2017) Katarzyna Jarzyńska brought it to my attention that other researchers had already adapted the term in the Polish humanities (Smykowski 2017; Sendyka 2017, 87).

⁵⁶ Some of my respondents felt the same way. “People used to say, and they still say, that if Dębrzyna could speak, it would have quite a story to tell. Even today there’s plenty of graves there if you know where to look” (Sept. 2017).

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Prof. Ewa Domańska for her inspiring consultation and for alerting me to literature on the memory of the Shoah in local communities.

⁵⁸ As of 2017, parts of the forest where the murders had been committed are being cleared. This inevitably produces association with a fresh murder, or at least desecration of the remains permanently embedded in some of the felled trees. The trees should be treated as human remains – “a posthumous continuation of transformed organic matter” (Domańska 2017, 42). I plan to include an exploration of the community aspects (Małczyński 2017,18) in a future article provided that adequate source material can be collected.

⁵⁹ There are several graves in supposed burial locations but those are all anonymous.

not share specific details relating to the victims; no details, let alone actual names or surnames, are available to break the anonymity. Only scraps of memory survive, such as the account of a murdered couple who were medical doctors, or a young man whose girlfriend lived at Leżajsk and did not get off the train with him:

My husband told me that a married couple died at Dębrzyna, they were both doctors, my husband said it was B. who took them to the forest (...) God settled his accounts with him, and he got killed by a train (ca. 86 years old, Grzęska, Sept. 2017)

I know this from my mum, there were people coming back from slave labour in Germany, and they got off here. One lad had met a girl when they were both in Germany. He got off the train here, and she travelled on to Leżajsk. They agreed to meet somewhere. He didn't show up so she came to him. She went home, and then she came back here, she went to his house and asked his mum if he was around. But his mum said he'd never come back. She says, "But he did!", and told her he'd got off that train. She says, "When was that?" And she says – I had this dream – she had a dream where he appeared in a dream to his mum, and told her "Mom, my own brother has killed me" (female respondents, group interview, Grzęska, Sept. 2017).

According to my respondents this need not have been a reference to an actual biological brother, but rather to a person the victim knew well. This account appears to be similar to the story of fratricide, mentioned earlier. The killers remained protected until their death, and the whole community maintained a peaceful relationship with them. As they put it, "what else was there to be done?". There was a paradoxical symmetry between the conspiracies of silence that surrounded the victims and the perpetrators, respectively. However, at this point we should revisit the question whether or not that silence was only a matter of fear for one's own safety when faced by criminals "with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*" (Agamben 1998, 53)? And also: were those perpetrators somehow connected to the new structures of communist power?

In order to get to the bottom of the convoluted structures of that post-memory as revealed in fragmentary narratives we need to bear in mind that the secret of Dębrzyna had been kept so closely that the younger generations (people under the age of 40) did not find out about the events until about a dozen years ago, when the murder victims were commemorated by a memorial erected at Dębrzyna on the initiative of Father Józef Nowak, the local priest at the time. Father Nowak recalls how, out for a walk in the forest of Dębrzyna, he found a tree with an old metal plaque bearing the words "To those murdered at Dębrzyna, 1945–46", and later noticed white crosses painted on some of the trees, and an unnamed grave with a cross⁶⁰. None of my respondents were able to say who had put the plaque on the tree. One of my female respondents claimed that the white crosses got painted because "somebody had a guilty conscience". Father Nowak told me this:

⁶⁰ Several other unidentified graves with crosses are situated in another location in the forest, closer to Budy Łańcuckie.



Photo 3. Memorial in the woods at Dębrzyna. 25.11.2017. Author: M. Lubańska.

As I was walking in that forest something kept reminding me that those people should be commemorated. I wasn't thinking of the criminals because God's judgement was upon them. And it was not my intention to remind people of them, but to commemorate those innocent people who died a cruel death (Sept. 2017).

It took about ten years to bring this plan to fruition in 2004:

This had been weighing down on me, and it was a weight off my chest when that memorial was erected, and the Holy Mass began. A weight off my heart. (Father Nowak, Sept. 2017)

With the help of his parishioners the priest erected a double cross in the forest: a cross of Christ with a second cross that had people bound together by a thorny bush; in addition there was the memorial: a boulder bearing the words "Man [is wolf] to man"⁶¹. To the murder victims at Dębrzyna in 1945–46. Eternal rest grant to them,

⁶¹ Unknowingly, the priest selected a quotation that became the subject of Giorgio Agamben's postsecular reflection on the *homo sacer*. According to Agamben, that Hobbesian motto, *Man is wolf to man*, refers to "a zone of indistinction between the human and the animal, a werewolf, a man who is transformed into a wolf and a wolf who is transformed into a man – in other words, a bandit, a *homo sacer*. (...)

O God”. The priest says the quotation from John Hobbes is intentionally incomplete because it felt more poignant that way. Some of my respondents misremember the inscription as saying, “Man to man...”⁶²

Tellingly, in order to express the depth of depravity that turned a forest into a “contaminated landscape”, a Catholic priest used a quotation from a secular author. As he explained, he was unable to find better words to describe the situation that unfolded in 1945–1946 at the forest of Dębrzyna in a way that would reflect the current needs of the local community. The counterpoint that emerges from the combination of religious prayer and philosophical reflection on the “state of exception” that prevailed at the time adds poignancy to the memorial, and turns it into a postsecular object. The memorial itself and the related religious rituals both lend themselves to being interpreted in terms of the concept of “ontological penumbra”, where religious and secular motifs often overlap in surprising ways in an effort to express phenomena that evade customary epistemological classifications. The need to commemorate the location by introducing new conduits of memory – a cross, a memorial, a small stone altar – stems from the moral insight that a “contaminated landscape” should not be allowed to remain mute⁶³. Hence the desire to turn those places into places of memory by erecting memorials to the victims who had been robbed of their lives.

In Father Nowak’s experience the forest had an uncertain status given the local attitudes, especially among the oldest generation, who were unsure whether it was better to commemorate the place, or to consign it to oblivion. Knowing about the secret in that particular landscape, the clergyman was willing to confront the problem of human helplessness in the face of evil, and to save the forgotten victims from oblivion. Although it was not possible to lift the victims out of their anonymity, the priest involved the local communities in an annual rite of commemoration, celebrating mass for the victims and the perpetrators. Has that initiative actually made a difference? The early reactions were varied. Some of the locals feared that the memorial would commemorate the perpetrators, others were unwilling to rake up the past – nonetheless, the first commemorative mass drew a large crowd. For the past 13 years people from the local villages, presumably including relatives of victims and perpetrators, have been gathering here for a sort of pilgrimage. To add solemnity to those celebrations,

And this lupinization of man and humanization of the wolf is at every moment possible in the *dissolutio civitatis* inaugurated by the state of exception” (Agamben 1998, 64). In this reading, the motto relates to “the Hobbesian state of nature” in which it is an “exception and ... threshold” that constitutes law and turns a neighbour into a bare life and a *homo sacer*”.

⁶² Similar to the motto of *Medaliony* (1946), a well-known book of short stories by Zofia Nałkowska inspired by Nazi atrocities – *Ludzie ludziom zgotowali ten los*, or “People dealt this fate to people”.

⁶³ Nonetheless the commemorative candles occasionally lit by the locals and the white crosses painted on the trees turn this contaminated landscape into a pale shadow of a place of memory, though one effaced and obscured to a point where it becomes unreadable to a chance passer-by.

the commemorative mass is these days celebrated by several priests from local villages where the victims may have lived. This way, the memory of the murders at Dębrzyna has been brought back to life to some degree, and has been passed on to the next generation. At the same time, many of the old strategies of silence have been respected.

CONCLUSIONS

Those noteworthy achievements notwithstanding, Dębrzyna continues to be a place of non-memory, where the past “cannot be negated totally (due to the emotional impact of dead bodies or to ethical motivations), but neither can it become incorporated into local history for reasons that fail to be articulated” (Sendyka 2017, 88, my translation). The memorial offers no information about the identity of the victims or the perpetrators. In this it reflects the attitudes of the local community towards the events at Dębrzyna, leaving out all those things that fail to conform to the local community’s patriotic and Christian self-image. I agree with Roma Sendyka that the formation of places of non-memory is motivated by an effort to “put a stop to potential significations and images” (2017, 88), and I believe that this particular instance is an example of this social phenomena. This is indirectly confirmed by my respondents, who tackle the problem of their “inconvenient” past. This said, the way they talk about the victims indicates a telling paradox. A religious outlook on pain and suffering dominates in the area of Przeworsk. Human bodies are viewed as places continually threatened by interference from evil powers (leading to disease, evil thoughts, nervous breakdowns), but also susceptible to healing by divine grace, the Holy Spirit (charismatic healing masses are very popular in the area, celebrated by popular figures such as Fr. Józef Witko or Fr. Marian Rajchel, an exorcist). Nonetheless, the language used to discuss the victims is secular and reifying. Instead of words like *victims*, *martyrs*, *neighbours* or even *doctors from Lvin*, a language of residuals and material remains is used, and people refer to *bones*, *skulls*, *remains*, *bodies*, and *shin bones*: things that to an untrained eye are almost indistinguishable from animal body parts.

The secularity of the language used to discuss the murder victims at Dębrzyna creates an impression of indifference; there was no God or man at that historical juncture who seemed to care about those people. How else can we explain the fact that the victims are not remembered in any way, even as anonymous individuals? Was the silence about the discoveries of dead bodies intended to thwart potential search parties or criminal investigations? Was it a failure of human solidarity in the face of fear and lawlessness? Why did the local inhabitants, who were religious, not choose to apply the ready-made Christian matrix that gives meaning to blameless suffering (in secular terms: pointless suffering) by analogy with Christ’s suffering? The question that begs to be asked is: why do my respondents treat the victims’ remains as secular bodies

with no distinguishing qualities? The memorial refers to them as “those murdered” – today they are even less than the “bare lives” they had turned into before their death. Nameless and fused with the natural world, they are mere shadows of *la vita nuda*, “things ... scattered all over the forest”, in the words of one respondent. This means that silence becomes permissible: nameless and with no place in human memory, the victims become part of the natural world.

When I raised those points during a public discussion that followed a screening of the film documentary in the municipal library at Przeworsk, one woman objected, pointing as a counterargument to the commemorative masses celebrated every year in the forest. But it seems to me, and some of my respondents appeared to agree⁶⁴, that those masses paradoxically offer a pretext to some members of the local community to refuse to engage with the problem at a deeper level. The masses are regarded in this case as a religious act that provides closure to the problem of the murders, effectively removing the need to discuss or think about the problem in either secular or religious terms. By complying with the Christian duty to offer prayers for the dead, the local community can (legitimately in this case) self-identify as Christian. This is confirmed by the fact that Father Nowak informed me in February 2018 that both himself and the local chapter of Akcja Katolicka in the parish of Świętoniowa had reached the decision to no longer talk to me about Dębrzyna for fear of publicising the murders. Just like the Polish nation cannot be held responsible for those individuals who murdered Jews, they argued, the local community should not be blamed for the activities of a gang of murderers. Quoting a Polish Renaissance poet, Jan Kochanowski, the priest asked me “not to worry the mind too much” about those events (*więcej tym głowy nie psować*). This is a clear demonstration of the way his narrative changed over time. Perhaps this is connected to the controversial new law that came into effect in Poland shortly before our conversation, threatening legal consequences for unfounded accusations of Polish complicity in Nazi crimes; in any case he drew a comparison between the situation of the inhabitants of Świętoniowa and Grzęska on the one hand, and the situation of the Polish nation facing accusations of anti-Semitism on the other.

Importantly, Asad’s insight applies in this case: secularity and religion can only be studied indirectly by looking at things like people’s attitudes towards pain and suffering; this way we can grasp certain complications in the way local communities cope (or fail to cope) with collective trauma, where the responsibility of the perpetrators continues to weigh heavily on the conscience of passive witnesses⁶⁵, and the problem

⁶⁴ This sentiment was independently voiced by several people.

⁶⁵ Of course this might arguably be considered an oxymoron: perhaps we should use instead Janicka’s concept of “an initiated participant observer” (Janicka 2014/2015, 160) because inhabitants of Grzęska and Świętoniowa were aware that the forest was a crime scene and accepted the fact. As a result they can hardly be viewed as *bystanders* (Hilberg 2007), or people who accidentally found themselves in the vicinity of a crime scene, and may or may not have been eye witnesses (Gross 2014, 885). *Bystanders*

of responsibility for the silence remains unsolved. At the same time I agree with Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's insightful observation, which dovetails with my postsecular analysis of this material:

Silence is an active process. The essence of silence lies in omission and concealment. Concealment is a strange operation that must be performed on oneself or on God, who is treated like a fool who can be tricked or talked round to take a different position. We worry about our image abroad [as a nationality], and fail to consider the condition of our soul. In a Christian country, how is it possible that people say "We'll muddle through somehow, those were difficult times..."⁶⁶

When confronted with the religion of most respondents, this silence becomes telling. It appears paradoxical that people whose religion fundamentally involves continual contemplation on the innocent victimhood of Jesus fail to find parallels between the events in the past and the Christian paradigms of undeserved suffering – or perhaps they find them but choose to remain silent. This lends weight to those individuals who find themselves in the minority, yet who feel the obligation to be guardians of memory, seeking to learn more about the murders, and above all to reclaim the dignity and humanity of the victims.

It is probably relevant that those people either enjoyed a very strong position in the local community (like Władysław), or conversely find themselves on the fringes of the community, with less involvement in, and more independence from, the other inhabitants. Most of those people have moved from Grzęska or Świątoniowa to the town of Przeworsk. Some of them are religious, others are non-believers. Standing apart from the local community, they feel an obligation to preserve the memory of the murders; in a way they want to save the victims from oblivion⁶⁷. Can we treat them as members of that select group St. Paul calls "the remnant", which Agamben has written so much about? Is that group likely to grow further? For now, I will leave this question open, and will address it in my future research.

Translated from Polish by Piotr Szymczak

in this case were the children who accidentally stumbled upon the dead bodies, like Władysław Łania as a young boy. Upon his discovery he became an initiated participant observer like most of the other inhabitants (I am assuming some individuals may have remained in the dark), and finally became a *witness*. What compelled people to remain as "initiated participant observers" was fear. "Everybody feared those thugs", said Łania. Another respondent told me that adults would tell children, "Kids, you'd better stay away from that place if you want to live" (M, ca. 90 years old, Nov. 2017). Dębrzyna was also a forbidden topic of conversation.

⁶⁶ Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, <http://magazynkontakt.pl/stworzyc-sobie-zyda.html>, access 09.03.2018.

⁶⁷ This is a crypto-reference to Agamben who writes about the relationship between memory and salvation in *The Time That Remains* (2005).

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