eurozine

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# Poland as the sick man of Europe?

*Jedwabne, "post−memory" and historians*

Joanna Tokarska−Bakir investigates the defence mechanisms triggered by the European past: on the one hand the Holocaust guilt−complex and on the other the language historians use to talk about it.

The following article deals with the debate provoked in Poland by the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbours* (Gross 2001), and attempts to single out the defence mechanisms revealed during a discussion about the past in the context of postwar Europe. This context is two−sided: on the one hand it is generated from the Holocaust guilt complex[1] shared by all Europeans−although to different extents and various levels of awareness. On the other hand, the context is shaped by the European cultural tradition, which has provided the very language for the discussion of guilt. In the case of the Jedwabne debate and in analogous discussions in Germany and France, the language in which decisive conversations took place and solutions were reached was not determined by religion (which is supposedly so strong in Poland) but by science. All of the other voices in the debate (including that of the church) aspired to that of the historical sciences. This is not accidental: despite carefully maintained appearances, it is scientific rather than religious language that is the *lingua franca* of Polish politics, social life, business and entertainment. Despite its continual demonstration of an ever−strong Catholicism, today's Poland is undergoing a period of profound spiritual uncertainty.

In this context, the historian's responsibility is all the greater. In the present article, I deal with those aspects of language which are certainly not exclusive to Poland, and which have prevented historians from fully engaging with and working through the past during the Jedwabne debate. Polish historiography, which throughout the years of the partitions of the country in the 19$^{th}$ c. was the guardian of the national identity, and was marked by martyrologic sentiments, and during the communist reign was bound by censorship, does not easily take the risk of performing the role which the context of a democratic social dialog imposes onto it. As JŸrgen Habermas claimed during the German *Historikerstreit* period, historians' role in developing an "accurate, critically tested memory concerning events that play crucial role in a collective past is an important component of a legitimate policy. Moreover, accurate, critically tested memory work is related to the kind of active forgetting of the past [being of course, a component of, not an alternative to, remembering and memory work] , or letting bygones be bygones" (quoted in LaCapra 2001:96). Nobody is better prepared to performing the role than historians. The work becomes all the more important at times when the irrational element becomes more prominent in European debates. The regularity and public character of those debates, the clear sequence of events, consistent division of roles and, most

importantly, desperate lack of conclusions, indicate that there is an element of myth present, which demands to be analysed[2]. The chronology of events surrounding each of the debates could be outlined as follows: first a film (for instance Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* or Agnieszka Arnold's *Sasiedzi* [Neighbours]), a book (Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1997) or Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbours* (2001)), or an exhibition (e.g. Hamburger Institut fŸr Sozialforschung, *Wehrmacht Crimes*) appears. The film, book or exhibition in question is a provocation, and it illuminates certain facts in a shockingly bold manner. At times, the argument it advances is founded on erroneous suppositions (such as the Goldhagen's racist−like concept of the "innate" nature of German anti−Semitism) or on limited or misinterpreted source materials (as in the case of the *Wehrmacht Crimes* exhibition, which included pictures of massacres conducted by the Red Army, among others, [as well as a scandalous−from the Polish point of view−silence on the period of defending the Wehrmacht in 1939−1940 ). Such factual inaccuracies irritate historians, some of whom attempt to discredit the entire issue at all costs (as we have seen in the debate over the Jedwabne massacre, where researchers are accused of either a "lack of methodology" or taking part in the "Holocaust Industry"). Yet the attempt to dismiss the issue fails, as the public is very much interested in continuing the debate. There is more and more commotion; artists and intellectuals join the debate. (The most characteristic example in the German context being the contribution of JŸrgen Habermas, who described Goldhagen's volume as "penetrating and morally powerful" and claimed it is "a source of important impulses for the public conscience"[3] ). Such declarations are the final straw for historians, who take offence and withdraw from the debate.

The historians' nervousness is understandable, as the debates in question normally contain an element of criticism of traditional historiography. More worrisome is that their statements demonstrate a complete lack of understanding of what public discourse is, as well as the very role they themselves perform on the one hand, and their readers on the other.

Why is the argument so passionate? In fact, what some perceive as an hysterical epiphenomenon, a side effect of the "trauma−business" and of ideological manipulation, others tend to treat as no less than a "displacement of the sacred" (LaCapra 2001:23)[4]. Citing Walter Benjamin, they argue that the mythical is often concealed in such mass phenomena in our laicized world. It is also well known that myth is revealed through recurrence and repetition. This is not at all an attempt to rehabilitate myth as a source of truth, but rather to point out that it is dangerous to underestimate myth (as the examples of Volkism, Nazism, Communism, anti−Semitism and others prove). It is not enough, as Immanuel Kant said, "to renounce bad dreams". Bad dreams need to be recognised as well.

When the entire stock of a book published in an elite publishing house, describing the burning of a group of people in a shed, is unexpectedly sold out (Gross 2001); when in another country an offensive book sells out which features descriptions of carnival−like cruelty and implies its readers possess a kind of an "anti−Semitic gene" (Goldhagen 1997); in short, when an epidemic of post−traumatic neurosis seems to spread over the course of a few dozen years, an observer of social phenomena should think twice before ignoring the symptoms.

### "Post−traumatic culture"

What is the mystery buried in the sixty−year−old tragedy that refuses to be dismissed, that re−visits its changing audiences like a recurring dream even though the actors have long left the theatre? What is the power thanks to which "time passes, war and annihilation are driven away, but the dead are closer and closer to us" (Happrechts 1998, quoted in: Pieciak 2002:146)? How is it possible that more than a half−century later, the wounds have not been scarred over? No one can answer these questions in isolation. In this case, one needs to "accept without asking who is offering". The sociologist must learn from the psychologist, the anthropologist from the philosopher, the literary critic from the historian, and vice versa.

The category of *post−memory* (Hirsch 1997:22)[5], from which I would like to start to answer these questions, is a reflection in part of each of those fields of investigation, as well as of a world in which nothing is the way it used to be. Today's memory is no longer memory. Marianne Hirsch explains: "Post−memory characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understand nor recreated" (1997:22).

The existence of post−memory is understandable in families burdened by a traumatic past. Why, though, does it haunt those who were not directly marked by tragedy? Why does it, despite the age−old instinct of isolating those "infected with misfortune", pour out of the confines of hospices and mental institutions and afflict not only single individuals but entire societies? The phenomenon is clearly a manifestation of displacement: it occurs in a surrogate, symbolic place and moment, in a location removed in space and time from the events to which it refers. In fact, it is the gradual disappearance of the "real" victims of the trauma that actually triggers the phenomenon. The public and polyphonic character of post−memory, curiosities like the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski (a man who adopted to perfection, though for no obvious reason, somebody else's trauma (see LaCapra 2001:207−209)), as well as phenomena like the separate life of the Holocaust in the U.S. public consciousness[6] − all of this indicates that what we are dealing with here with is a singular, myth−making force. This is a surrogate, appropriated memory, a displaced one, and therefore it cannot, like the historicism in Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, die a natural death. Post−memory is bound to explode rather than pass into oblivion, and once it gathers itself up after the explosion, it will recommence its work, Sisyphus−like, mythical *par excellence*.

The phenomenon fits perfectly into the landscape of "post−traumatic culture", which has been developing intensively since the late 1980's as a reaction to the previous heroic "culture of silence" (for a critical analysis see Farell 1998; cf. also Leys 2000). "Post−traumatic culture" continually surprises us in its ability to combine an obsession with the past with an ever−more limited historical awareness (cf. van den Braembussche 1995:98); it concentrates on a central trauma, ancient and suppressed, which returns unexpectedly and entirely revises the reality surrounding it. This condition rejects any cure, fulfilling itself instead in the obsessive examination of a never−healing wound. Trauma becomes its fetish, a mask for "the other", a mystery which the culture cannot communicate in any other way, as it remains unaware of it.

## "A house I don't want to live in any more "

One of the many metaphors which scholars use when researching this peculiar trauma is that of "skeletons in the closet" or "a haunted house". Dominick

LaCapra, the author of an important volume on the post−traumatic culture, explains that "ghosts of the past are symptomatic revenants who have not been laid to rest because of a disturbance in the symbolic order, a deficit in the ritual process, or death so extreme in its unjustifiability or transgressiveness that in certain ways it exceeds existing modes (perhaps any possible mode) of mourning − roam the post−traumatic world and are not entirely 'owned' as 'one's own' by any individual or group. If they haunt a house (a nation, a group), they come to disturb all who live − perhaps even pass through − that house" (LaCapra 2001:215).

LaCapra cannot be accused of being uncritical towards post−traumatic culture. As a matter of fact, his analysis begins with a critique of the approach and its abuses (such cases as Wilkomirski the imitator, Goldhagen "the racist", and Lanzmann the avenger who deliberately belittles his Nazi interlocutors (1985:52, 95 ff.)); its fallacies ("the saviour kitsch" of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, Wajda's *Korczak* and Benigni's *La vita e bella*); its misrepresentations, caused either by an unbearable pain and good intentions (see Bikont 2002), or on the contrary, by numbness and an excessive wariness; and finally, its taste for all kinds of exaggeration, from unconditional identification with the victims to various other kinds of "transference "and "vicarious experience" to a secondary victimisation of the victims. The critique of the phenomenon is at the same time the reason LaCapra gives that historians are the best placed to testify against the transgressions of recurring, degenerate post−memory.

However, his faith in the role of the historian is not unconditional: "A goal of historical understanding is [...] to develop not only a professionally valid public record of past events but also critically tested, empirically accurate, accessible memory of significant events which becomes part of the public sphere. A related, problematic, even impossible goal is to assist in the effort to restore to victims (at least symbolically or even posthumously) the dignity perpetrators took from them − a restorative effort in which historical discourse is itself engaged to some extent (important forms of working through the past in process of mourning and attempts at proper burial" (LaCapra 2001: 95). The "accurate, critically tested memory work is related to the kind of active forgetting of the past, or letting bygones be bygones"; the work of historians would help to finally release the social energy which to this point has been directed towards staving off the nightmare.

If we agree with LaCapra's views on the responsibility of scholars of the past, the argument that bad faith, educational lacunae, and sensationalism are the causes of the diminished credibility of traditional historians appears to be just as misleading as the reduction of "post−traumatic culture" to the cynically−construed "Holocaust Industry". Following LaCapra, the reason why the mass audience rejects "proper" historiography wholesale would run something like this: it is because historiography has not prepared "a critical, accurate and fully accessible memory" of the past, and it has most certainly failed to mourn the past. What readers are searching for in Gross' and Goldhagen's books is what they fail to find in the writing of others: the "moral oxygen" that is released when one undertakes to answer questions for which there are no answers.

## At the source of the taboo

What happens when a researcher (or anybody else) attempts to ignore the ways in which the past influences him and thus defines his identity, instead of confronting this influence? The common belief on the issue, expressed in

phrases like "what you don't know, doesn't hurt you" (see e.g. Appleby et al. 1994: 307) is very different from the treatment of the phenomenon in psychology, which follows the founder of psychoanalysis in claiming that psychological reality is immortal, and therefore suppressing it does not lead to its elimination, but rather to further complicating its interdependencies. This is the problem addressed in Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's *The Inability to Mourn* (1975), a critique of the unexpressed love that Germans harbour for the strong man. Gerd Koenen spoke to this issue when he claimed that the German leftist terrorist groups of 1960's were in fact a reaction to a concealed memory of the Nazi past (Koenen 2001, the chapter: "Felix Culpa. VergangenheitsbewŠltigung als deutsche Selbstfaszination").

The historic trauma which for some reason is denied generates two pathological phenomena. In the more recently exposed layer, the topsoil, we find the above−mentioned post−memory, and below it the restricted territory of historical taboos. Such taboos develop around historical traces that are perceived as damaging "for the psychological equilibrium or identity", and therefore they are suppressed until they recede into the subconscious (see van den Braembussche 1998:101, 103). The force of the rejection of Gross's book (and earlier on, of Michal Cichy's 1994 article) may be explained, among other ways, by the violation of such a taboo. In the debate on the Jedwabne massacre, we observed all kinds of defensive strategies associated with the taboo (van den Braembussche 1998:106−109): o denial leading to deliberate, ideological suppression[7] ; o unconscious suppression[8] ; o cognitive−type suppression[9] ; and o mythological−type suppression[10].

It was the last of those strategies that was the most prominent in the discussion of the Jedwabne massacre−most clearly seen in Tomasz Strzembosz's statement that the massacre was committed by "23 outcasts and collaborationists" (Jedwabne 2002). Such an attitude contains a hidden implication that whoever commits such a crime becomes an outcast by definition, and thus the nation that has issued him remains untarnished. This "hoodlum theory" would of course be also very suitable for explaining the phenomenon of Poles selling Jews to the Germans, a perfect candidate for a historical taboo. A similar motivation was behind the compulsive search for a German presence in Jedwabne on the fatal day of July 10th, 1941, for which no evidence exists (see Ignatiew 2002)[11].

The continuation of Strzembosz's argument, which implies that the anti−Semitic sentiments in Jedwabne were a result of the co−operation of local Jews with the NKVD during the Soviet occupation, could be classified as a mixture of mythical and cognitive repression[12] . A similar interpretation might be ascribed to attempts to compromise the reputation of Jan Gross a sociologist, as well as to discredit Shmuhl Wasserstein, witness and survivor of Jedwabne crime, as an agent of the Polish secret police (Bikont 2002). Those claims were meant to reduce the cognitive dissonance between what one knows of one's own past (a murder committed by Poles) and what one currently thinks of oneself (Poles never commit murder, other than kill in self−defence, but are often murdered); as well as how, in relation to this, the past must be remembered (the Jedwabne massacre was a bloody retaliation on collaborationists, and as such it is partly justified; therefore, "sociologists" and "agents" should not be believed).

As far as the unconscious repression in the debate about Jedwabne is concerned, it has been illustrated by historians for the past six decades − those who had been researching Nazi crimes in the Lomza region and failed to take

interest in the Jedwabne, Radzilowo or Wasosza massacres until Arnold's film and Gross's volume. Similar symptoms from the repertoire of unconscious repression (some bordering on cognitive repression) may also be seen in Tomasz Szarota's comparative panorama of anti−Jewish pogroms in other Western countries, described in his most recent book (Szarota 2000). By placing the Jedwabne massacre in the context of a typical pattern of Nazi crimes, its significance is played down.

We should probably classify the following argument of Professor Szarota in the same category of repression: "I am [...] not sure if the support for the [ultra−Catholic] League of Polish Families in the last parliamentary election was not to a certain extent a perverse reaction to the debate on Jedwabne" (2002). Although it was formulated ex *post facto*, this opinion could have the same normative (prognosticating?) power as the Russian proverb *tishe yediosh, dalshe budiesh* ["the more quietly you go, the farther you will get"], which stubbornly returns in both Polish and foreign discourse on Jews.[13] It contains an implied warning on the destructive furies of nation−wide quarrels. If we consider Szarota's statement in psychoanalytic terms, according to which the violation of a taboo "must be punished or atoned for by all the members of the community if they are not all to suffer injury" (Freud 1958:33), we may conclude that the punishment meted out to Gross for the blasphemy he committed in his *Sasiedzi* was not sufficiently comprehensive and unanimous, therefore the entire Nation must be punished (with the League of Polish Families playing the role of the "furies").

The last kind of repression, which is in a sense the least interesting, is represented by historians' contributions to the Polish right−wing newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*. Here the debate on the Jedwabne massacre is described as "tampering with history" and "foreplay" before "Poland is pressured to pay the highest of reparations for lost Jewish property" (Jedwabne 2002). This line of reasoning has been supported by some in the Catholic hierarchy, for example Lomza bishop Stanislaw Stefanek, who declared that the accusations are motivated by Jews' financial claims (Jedwabne 2002). Such opinions would not merit attention if they did not revive the age−old myth of "Jewish perfidy" and "Jewish conspiracy", which has manifested itself throughout history in accusations of poisoning wells, desecrating the Host and ritual murder. This polymorphous myth erupts repeatedly in the wake of events that threaten its propagators' sense of security, and it is a dangerous catalyst for violence (as in the case of the pogrom of Jews in Kielce in 1946).

The four kinds of repression mentioned above are important, but they are not very representative of the pathology in reasoning demonstrated by Polish historians in the Jedwabne debate. A much more universal, dangerous, and at times difficult attitude to detect was the "professional stupor" characteristic of the mainstream researchers who took part in the public debate. Its causes are very complex and are instilled in the historian's academic mentality, manifested in a stubborn compliance with a very exacting idea of professional principles. It is to this mentality that the remaining part of my text will be devoted.

## Poland as the sick man of Europe

According to its classical definition, trauma brings about a dissociation of "affect" or sensibility, and "representation", cognitive powers: "one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (LaCapra 2001:42, see also the statements made by

Mordechai Podchlebnik and Simon Srebrnik in Lanzmann 1985:7, 91−2). When analysing the history of the debate on Goldhagen or Gross, one has the distinct impression that the public and historians in fact constitute two complementary aspects of the psyche of an individual suffering from post−memory syndrome. These aspects have been so cleanly delineated into "sensibility" and "sense" that the former have been completely given over to the public, and the latter completely to historians.

What trauma is concealed by the post−memory of this "individual"? It is not sufficient to say that it is a condensed trauma of war, which spans the period from a few years prior to the war to a few dozen years after it is finished. The trauma in question is actually a tangle of different traumas, and the post−memory of this "individual" is actually composed of a number of memories that contradict each other even while closely intertwined.

On the one hand we have here the Jewish memory of an intensifying pre−war anti−Semitism, and the tragedy of Polish Jews, assimilated or not, who were abandoned in the ghetto both by the people that they had chosen (the Poles) and by the "chosen people" (the Jews all over the world who were similarly slow to offer help). Then came the *Shoah*, followed by repeated expulsions, interrupted only by a few periods of illusion.

On the other hand, we have the Polish memory, which is no less complex, the memory of those "betrayed at dawn" (Zbigniew Herbert). On this side, the list of betrayals is longer, and the perpetrators less prone to repent. Aside from the Germans and the Russians, the list includes Poland's closest allies. They not only passively accepted Stalin's seizure of Poland in September 1939 and at the Yalta conference in 1945, but also−as in the history of the "Katyn lie", when the Soviets concealed the massacre of Polish officers in 1940−actively supported these actions. One might argue that it was at this historical juncture that Jews first appeared on the list of traitors (first in the autumn of 1939 when they "greeted the Soviets with bread and salt", and then as "Jew communists" and "secret police agents"). Whether or not they were really worthy of blame, the ferocity of accusations directed at them suggests that this is a venting of earlier grievances, which are immeasurably more serious and much more difficult to articulate.

The symmetry that is to be found between the "two memories", "two truths" and their delimiting contradictions is striking. If the Jewish identity is abased and mobilised by the "Auschwitz lie", the Polish memory is tormented and nourished by the "Katyn lie".

In the debate on Gross (2001), the two memories confronted each other, causing a mutual repression, after which each stridently claimed exclusivity. "The individual" in whose organism the confrontation occurred "fell ill" and as a result, his "sensibility" and "sense" were split, the former given over to the public, and the latter to the historians. While the public identified with the victims or the perpetrators of the crime in the debate on the Jedwabne massacre, the reaction of professional historians was rather that of a post−traumatic stupor.

If we were to draw the analogy between Jedwabne and the psychological condition of a traumatised patient even further and seek some form of therapy, the diagnosis would demand a cure that could, on the one hand, dispel the stupor, and on the other, impart some critical awareness to the patient. In a better world, the cure might be found in something, which in the context of the

current historical discourse would seem to be a joke: empathy[14] .

Let us first define what this empathy is not. It is not complete identification, the unconditional "sympathy" in which, no matter how noble the intention, the subject is usually lost−replaced by the sympathetic doctor himself, who unconsciously appropriates the subject's voice and attributes. Unlike such "sympathy", empathy is an act of "experiencing together" in which no one plays doctor; the cure for the traumatic split is on the one hand our attention and respect, and on the other our awareness that another's tragic experience may never become our own. Never an automatic compromise, empathy represents an opportunity for unearthing the truths spoken by both sides of the argument without ever annihilating the differences between them[15] . This could be the "happy end" of post−memory syndrome. Thanks to the intermediary of empathy, the public's sensibility and the historian's sense could once again communicate. The public would be enriched with a "critically tested, empirically accurate, accessible memory" (LaCapra 2001:95), and historians could recover the sensibility they lost. This sounds unfortunately close to the well−known adage from Psalms: "Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed each other" (Ps 85:11), and is probably just as difficult to bring into practice.

## Silencing the victims

Problems arise first of all because of the power of the traditionally held view on what writing history should be. In Poland, the claim that "a historian should be at one and the same time a critical intellectual," that "truth claims are necessary but not sufficient conditions that must be cogently related to others dimensions of historiography, including empathic, responsive understanding and performative, dialogical uses of the language" (LaCapra 2001:XII), will draw a smile rather than arouse interest. Scholars invest a considerable, methodical effort in *not knowing what they know and not feeling what they feel*. If the historians' sensibility is "repressed", it is so because they are working hard to meet the standards of their profession.

A most instructive example of this attitude can be found in an article Andrzej Paczkowski (2001), which attempts to draw a typology of the attitudes in the Jedwabne debate. The typology, listing four main points of view around which last−year discussion on Gross focused, is irreproachable according to the standard view on writing history, that the researcher shows no emotional involvement whatsoever. The views of the author, one of the most important Polish historians of modern times, are entirely undetectable. In an odd twist, this invisibility is reflected in the same manner in the typology of the debate itself. The affair is discussed in a way which prevents us from determining who is speaking, and therefore what the debate concerns: we read about of a group of Poles, a group of Jews, a group of Germans, and their motivations, yet nothing is directly identified. On only one occasion does the author offer a personal comment, in the form of a disclaimer concerning... Gross's ethnic background. This exception from the governing principle of the book appears to be a simple slip of the tongue, but as most slips of the tongue, it reveals the very core of the problem.

In the Polish public discourse, the question of who is or is not Jewish is still extremely important (cf. a recent OBOP survey on the role of Jews, Kublik 2002). When Paczkowski "defends" Gross by stating that he is not a Jew, as in the early 1990s when Archbishop Goclowski defended then−Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, he is following the rules of this discourse. To be clear: I

am not accusing Paczkowski of base intentions. I would merely point out that despite the best intentions, even the most conscientious of historians is subject to social conditioning−and he all the more subject to it the more he resists it.

LaCapra's work throws an interesting light on similar denials: self−censorship practices observed in the texts of historians with a formalist or a positivist attitude are an attempt to "deny one's transferential implications in the problems one treats − and those involved in them − through extreme objectification" (2001:78). According to the classic Freudian position, such transference is normally expressed by repeating or recreating in one's own discourse processes that have become apparent in the area under investigation. However shocking this may sound to our ears, unaccustomed to psychoanalysis, in historiography such relations of transference occur not only among researchers, but also between researchers and historical figures and events. On a certain level, e.g. among court experts and historians, "there's that tendency to repeat which, if not confronted, tends to take place in a blind and unchecked manner − to return as the repressed or to recur as the dissociated" (LaCapra 2001:143). This phenomenon always takes place and cannot be consciously controlled by anyone. The problem is not in the occurrence itself, but rather in facing it: "transference in this sense occurs willy−nilly, and the problem is how one comes to terms with it in ways involving various combinations, more or less variations, and hybridised forms of acting out and working through"(LaCapra 2001:36).

As far as historical taboos are concerned, the human mind manifests an almost telepathic ignorance of the distances and barriers that consciousness erects. In the mind's eye, all past events are equally present, the more so the more they are repressed[16]. In the writings of even the most detached researchers of the Holocaust, every now and then, the echoes of the horrors being analysed resound, and stray words, assessments and allusions appear (see for instance LaCapra's analysis (2001:112 ff.) of Hilberg (1985), which is a very valuable, but also very distanced work). Historians taking part in these encounters alternate between two roles: that of a witness, haunted by remorse and attempting to rid himself of it (making use of the four strategies that counter the historical taboo); and that of the perpetrator of evil, a demon−a trifle in the hand of "the dictate of history". Even when they identify with the victims, which is rare enough, historians cannot accept or reveal that fact out of fear of being accused of bias (NB: it is interesting that it is only the focus on the victim's voice that is seen as partisan); therefore the points of view not represented in their narratives seep through into ever new layers of post−memory, while the mills of myth work at full capacity.

According to LaCapra, ignoring the voice of the victims is a pathological expression of otherwise understandable defence mechanisms, subconsciously invoked by historians. Those mechanisms perform an important function: they protect the researcher's personal territory from an invasion of information which exceeds his level of resistance. However, if the researcher does not realise in time that he is approaching the limits of his resistance, the process becomes pathological, and leads to the "silencing" of victims and the application of other narrative techniques described below.

The suppression of the voice of the victims is a routine activity not only in historiography but also, *par force*, in the justice system. This could be clearly seen in the trial of the Jedwabne murderers after WW II, about which Andrzej Rzeplinski (2002) wrote, "the wronged are not featured [in it] at all [...]; the surnames and first names of those people are not mentioned. Even if a victim

is present in the court, he is not treated as a victim." Therefore we see that there is a price to pay for "avoiding bias" and "striving for full impartiality". During the trial, "ignoring the voice of the victims" is reduced to simple "ignoring the victims", which is more than just a linguistic elision: "No exhumation was performed. There were no victims in this trial. The crime resided in the fact that the inhabitants of Jedwabne and surrounding areas chased the Jews to the market square and guarded them there for a while. The court's sentence does not mention the burning of the Jews" (Rzeplinski 2002)[17]
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## "History is not written by pub crawling"

LaCapra observes that to the same extent that historians refuse to accept the fact that they act as witnesses for the past, they will deny the effects of transference and reject the "affective component in understanding, [...] in the form of empathy" (2001:97). They will also be all the more reluctant to take on the role of provoking, gathering and co−creating oral testimonies.

As the following quotation will show, the fact that Polish historians have undervalued oral testimonies for so long may be explained by a particular idea they harbour about professional standards. Szarota (2002) states: "Gross cannot understand why nobody took up the Jedwabne matter earlier. In fact, he says that all one had to do was to go there, enter a pub and talk to the people. To this, I answer: history is not written by pub crawling. It is in fact a question of professional standards."

It is not difficult to reconstruct the reasons why researchers dislike the *oral history* of the pub. Anybody who has "pub crawled" knows that participating in the creation of an oral testimony engages the researcher to a much greater extent than recommended by the dominant research paradigm. This is because historians are reluctant to engage in any conversation−even that taking a particular form like an interrogation or an exam (not to mention a conversation over a glass of vodka)−that exposes both participants. One should by no means limit oneself to such a form, but the haughty rejection of an opportunity to find out what people say in bars, and from this an open expression of group self−awareness, cannot be explained in any rational manner. Krzysztof Czyzewski claims that in post−war Yugoslavia there was an expression: "*Charshiya zna*", which should probably be translated as: "it is said in the street that ..." (personal communication). In order to appreciate the role of the *charshiya*, one does not even need to be an ethnographer, it is enough to simply to read detective stories.

Anyone who talks to the victim of a crime, its perpetrator, or even a witness, has a much smaller chance of remaining unaffected by the conversation than someone who reads interrogation reports written in the third person, sitting in the quiet of the archives. Someone who generally listens, will discover without even trying to, the great importance of the manner in which questions are asked. This is only a small step away from grasping the sense and appreciating the "affective component in understanding, [...] in the form of empathy". Just as a careful selection of questions may encourage the interlocutor to say certain things, discouraging and confusing him may easily cause him to lose interest in divulging anything−in particular those facts which are a psychological burden. This is best illustrated by the following statement of Leon Kieres, the head of the Polish National Memory Institute: "My own professional experience allows me to state that what witnesses are willing to testify to depends to a large extent on the personality of the individual who gathers their stories" (Kieres

2000:5; in this context see also Rzeplinski 2002). If one does not ask certain questions of oneself, one will not hear the answers given in response.

### Is the sensibility of historians repressed?

How is all of this related to the professional self−awareness of the researchers of the past? Hayden White's claim that professional historians are "extreme examples of repressed sensibility", is still perceived in Poland as a derisive comment not worthy of serious attention (see e.g. Ptaszynski 2002). However, if we were to accept the barbarous idea that there are things in this world which are not subject to our conscious control, which we can only control when we take the time to recognise them, many of those concerned might, after brief reflection, agree with White's provocative statement.

LaCapra represents the situation of historical sciences in today's world as a continuum, where one end we find radical constructivists like H. White or F. Ankersmith (whose followers are hard to come by in Poland), and on the other end, the *self−sufficient or self−explanatory research model* which most of Polish researchers of the past follow. The latter position, which could for simplicity's sake be dubbed "positivist", is described by LaCapra as having five basic characteristics:

o a strict separation between subject and object;
o a tendency to conflate objectivity with objectivism;
o an identification of historical understanding with causal explanation;
o a "denial of transference or the problem of implication of the observer in the object of observation";
o "an exclusion or downplaying of a dialogic relation to the other recognised as having a voice or perspective that question the observer or even place him or her in question by generating problems about his or her assumptions, affective investments, and values" (LaCapra 2001:5).

I have already mentioned LaCapra's hypothesis that the fear of reflection, methodological circumspection, and the detachment observed in traditional historiography are a result of its fear of trauma, which the researcher has to confront. Like a surgeon puts on scrubs before a surgery, a historian might wear a kind of armour which would protect his personal territory from the invasion of threatening information (LaCapra 2001:40). This attitude could also emerge as a striving for maximum impartiality, which is to be observed in:

o the reification of the subject under study, in the desire to keep it at the maximum distance−language tabooing, unconscious acceptance of the language of the perpetrators[18] ;
o the elimination of the victim's voice − in the Jedwabne debate, their language was characterised as "the language of misery" (Zakowski 2000:133; see also LaCapra 2001:100, 112 etc);
o preference for the "self−explanatory" testimonies left by the perpetrators − e.g. the passionate search in the Ludwigsburg archives for the film that was supposedly shot in Jedwabne by the Nazis, as well as for the traces of the Schaper, Birkner or any other German commando,
o focusing on the perpetrators.

The question arises as to what chance of objectivity a researcher has, if in selecting sources in a similar−objectivist−manner, he has isolated himself from at least one−half of the reality. Furthermore, had the researcher not disabled his "sensibility" so early on, would he really be satisfied with his results, given the

unconscious *fascinatio* with the perpetrators of evil created in him and in his readers as a result of the voices cited?

### A heroic and a non−heroic death

One example may suffice to describe the cost of repressing one's sensibility, and also how "the return of what was repressed" afflicts even the most conscientious of researchers. The example is taken from conversations between Tomasz Szarota and J. Zakowski (2000). Zakowski initiates the exchange by stating: "It is indeed very difficult to imagine, but the intensity of terror and fear may be illustrated by the fact that in the first days, even before the Gestapo came, not only were the Poles passive witnesses of the crimes committed to the Jews, but also other Jews" to which Szarota answers,

> I do not undertake to explain this. One may of course make recourse to negative stereotypes. [...] But negative stereotypes never explain history, and often falsify it. In any case it is difficult to understand − and Gross does not attempt to explain it in his book either − why fifteen hundred healthy individuals in good physical shape being led to death by less than a hundred of criminals armed only with clubs did not attempt to defend themselves or at least run.

Further on, he continues "In Gross's book, we find a description of a situation which may shed some light on this mystery. This is the story of Michal Kuropatwa, a Jewish cart−driver, who during the Soviet occupation had hidden a Polish officer in his house. Before he was led into the shed, somebody dragged him out of the crowd to save his life, but he chose to die along with the others. Gross compares Kuropatwa's decision to that of Janusz Korczak [who decided to follow the children under his care to a death camp], but he does not quote the sentence that witnesses report Kuropatwa to have uttered at that point, 'Where the Rabbi goes, I will follow.' These are words that are worth comprehending if we want to understand the Jedwabne phenomenon." (Zakowski 2000:123)

Szarota seems to imply here that in order to "understand the Jedwabne phenomenon" we must first of all take into account that the Jews themselves contributed to the fact that so many of them died, and secondly that the act of Michal Kuropatwa's act should not be compared to Janusz Korczak's decision, as someone who is only following his Rabbi does not merit such a comparison. Therefore, in his interpretation of the "Jedwabne phenomenon" Szarota follows in the footsteps of those who, whether out of baseness or self−pity, have accused and stigmatised victims since time immemorial. Such accusations have been repeatedly voiced by representatives of the Christian tradition, those who were never in fact victims themselves. By repudiating those others, and differentiating between a heroic and a non−heroic death[19], Poles have violently repudiated themselves and their own historical tragedies, while unconsciously repeating the gesture of segregation, which once gave rise to the ghettos and the Holocaust. It is a sad thing when today's historians also give in to this "compulsive repetition".

Many years ago Maurycy Handelsman charged scholars with "the obligation of omniscience", encouraging them to "introspection", and proposed "psychology and logic" as methodologically indispensable instruments (1928:1, 21, 34). Today, "the obligation of omniscience" has been misplaced somewhere, "introspection" has been limited to common sense, and most historians believe

that they know the so−called psychological truths and historical stereotypes of their own experience, therefore they do not reach for LaCapra's (2001) or Gilman's (1986) volumes. In this context, it is not surprising that from the position of researcher is becoming that of informer.

## The historians' club

Historians' ideas on what veracity in writing history should be are commonly confused with what Hans−Georg Gadamer called the most treacherous of illusions − the illusion of cognitive neutrality. It is a factor that exposes the researcher to the influence of both historical taboos and individual biases and stereotypes, and as a result repeatedly invites cynicism. This so−called neutrality, which consists of repressing what one really thinks and feels, provokes a surprise attack: the prejudice returns, all the stronger, except that the forces that could be used to recognise it are now engaged in masking and rationalising the ideas which the researcher refuses to abandon. The European philosophical tradition is well acquainted with this threat, which it dubs *vis a tergo*, or a blow from the least expected direction. It is under its influence that the attitude of *sine ira atque studio* advocated by Tacitus is transformed into its own opposition −resigning oneself from criticism and a semi−conscious rationalisation for wrongdoing.

In Poland, the historian enjoys an uncommon power. He is held up next to the Romantic poets, whose role in Poland was rightly compared to that performed by the prophets in ancient Israel (Jozef Czapski). It is indeed a great responsibility that a Polish historian carries.

He is the one who has been entrusted with the treasure of identity, the one who is to carry it safely through confusion and preserve it. Yet it is not enough to hide the treasure in order to save it from being lost. Buried money may rot, currency may be devalued, metallic pieces of jewellery may rust. Our historians inspect the deposit so rarely that, being a person of little faith, I personally gave up hope that any of them would make such a move in my lifetime. And it would certainly never occur to me that one of them might not only attack the historical taboo, but also call into question the very "principle of discretion" that is the law of their club. Under this principle, admitting that one is affected by the events one is describing−moved, scared, haunted, tempted to give up the subject, or, God forbid, change methodologies−is fundamentally unthinkable. It is only done among sociologists and women, for a sociologist is to a historian what a woman is to a man.

Gross's contribution is that he had the courage to grasp what role today's historian might play in liberating an experience trapped in post−memory, and then he did what fell to him to do. One can either throw him out of the historians' club, or change the rules.

As far as the rules are concerned, let me also add that the principle of discretion ("let us rather not say anything about ourselves") originally appeared in Europe as a mandate of aristocratic decorum rather than of bourgeois savoir−vivre. Its role was to curb narcissism rather than to avoid risks or to conceal what one thinks or what one is responsible for. The two latter cases would contradict the higher principle of truthfulness. Yet in the bourgeois version of the principle, the same shameful concealment−according to the ethics of previous ages−of what one really thinks and really is, begins to be considered honourable. Taken in combination with the positivist ideology, the principle of discretion described above has become a true poison for the soul,

not to mention the body, and it is in fact responsible for the lasting separation of "sense" and "sensibility".

I have often heard of it being unmasked as "a product of male ascetic tradition", and a manifestation of the "desire to surpass the body in the search for the truth" (see Schott 1991: 203). Yet I have never before realised so forcefully how it translates into the relationship between freedom and knowledge, and how someone who "surpasses the body in the search for the truth ", may stumble on a corpse and completely fail to notice it, how in allowing professional stupor to become the standard, one transforms history into a "tale told by an idiot − full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". When in a world controlled by such a vision of history a book like Gross's appears, to be followed shortly by an explosion of "post−traumatic psychosis", this should not be understood as a symptom of an illness, but rather as a sign of health, and even more than that, "a proof of existence", as described by Hanna Krall (1996).

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1 Daniel R. Schwartz (1999: 8−9): "Each country, including the United States, wrote its own version of postwar history, often to suit the needs of rebuilding its self−esteem. The cold war meant that history was distorted. We were told that the United States, England and France won the war when in fact France was defeated country complicit in the Holocaust. Decades passed before France began as a nation to reexamine its role and realize that only a comparative few partisans resisted the Vichy government that rounded up and deported Jews beyond the Nazi demands. In the last few years, we have been learning about Switzerland's role in expropriating Jewish money as well as laundering expropriated German money and harbouring Nazi assets during the war. Finally, 50 years later, French war criminals such as Maurice Papon are brought to trial. [...] In France after the Allied victory, 300 000 French collaborator were arrested and 7037 were put to death. But then followed 25 years of silence before a period of reexamination − 25 years after the war."

2 "The essence of a mythical event resides in its recurrence. Futility is thus inscribed as a concealed figure of the fate of the heroes of the underworld (Tantalus, Sisyphus, Danaidae)". Benjamin 1982:178. All unsigned translations by MP.

3 Excerpts of Habermas's laudatio during the ceremony of handing Goldhagen the Democracy Award, awarded by the *BlŠtter fŸr deutsche und internationale Politik* monthly, quoted in Pieciak 2002:131.

4 he explanation of the formulation is mine: LaCapra would probably refer not to Benjamin, but directly to Freud.

5 I extend Hirsch's category, which was originally used to describe the psychological situation of the children of Holocaust survivors. Post−memory so understood would be a phenomenon of the "pseudomorphosis" type, which is described by Spengler (1959 [1924]).

6 See Novick (1999); consider also Charles Maier's observation (LaCapra 2001:171−2) that the Americans have the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, but no museums devoted to the extermination of Native Americans or to the enslavement of African−Americans.

7 The example that van den Braembussche (1998:107) cites in connection to this are manipulations by totalitarian regimes, such as the French removal from national memory of "the souvenirs" of the execution of Louis XVI soon after the Revolution (see Ozouf 1976).

8 Van den Braembussche's example (1995:107): the weakening of the German national identity after WW II as a result of the unconscious rejection of the past.

9 Van den Braembussche (199b: 108) provides two interesting examples here. The first of them is the following: in the Japanese history handbooks of the 1980's, the following correction is introduced in the description of the massacre that was committed on Chinese civilians in Nanking in 1937: "Because some civilians confused by the occupation lost control and began to shoot, Japanese soldiers killed numerous civilians, including women and children". The second example concerns

the so−called Masada myth, widely used in creating Israeli national identity. The suicide at the conclusion of the myth, which is in fundamental conflict with the spirit of Judaism, has been transformed into a slaughter committed by the Romans (see Ben−Yehuda 1995).

10 Two examples are provided here (van den Braembussche 1998: 109−110): the so−called Constantine's donation i.e. Charlemagnes' falsification, which legitimised the Pope's right to the State of the Vatican (see Le Goff 1992: 191), as well as a number of myths from modern German history, including the myth of the siege which supposedly forced Germany to join WW I, *Dolchstosslegende* and *Diktatlegende* .

11 Tomasz Strzembosz's argumentation presents here a striking parallel to those in Germany who have been protecting the idea of the unspoiled honor of Wehrmacht by any means necessary during Goldhagen's debate and after. See Pieciak 2001.

12 "Some critics have seen the creation of a historical myth in the recent 'battle of historians' (*Historikerstreit*), in which the comparison between Nazist extermination camps and Stalinist expurgations was 'used' to deny or to overcome the 'singularity' of the Holocaust, its incomparable 'uniqueness'. This is not so much the assertion that the extermination of million European Jews does not represent something unique, because it should be put in a 'universal−historical perspective and thus be relativised (a third type of coping strategy!), but the view that the 'Holocaust' was provoked by the bolsjewist 'great purge' of the thirties and has thus to be interpreted as an immediate reaction against the danger of 'Asiatic' extermination policy from the bolsjewists, was indeed rejected by a number of critics as a sheer myth," Van den Braembussche, SP 110. See also: Ch.S.Maier, *The Unmasterable Past, Holocaust and German Nationalism*, Cambridge 1988. (Van den Braembussche 1998:110). It is in the same category that we should place some of the German reactions to the revelation of the fact that the Jedwabne massacre was caused by the Poles. In this context, consider also the subtitle "Die Diskussion Ÿber das Massaker in Jedwabne verletzt den Mythos der Polen als Volk der Opfer [The discussion of the Jedwabne massacre belies the myth of Poland as a victim nation]", which the editors of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* added to my text on Jedwabne (Tokarska−Bakir 2001).

13 In this context, consider Roman Bugaj's text on historical truth (2001), as well as two earlier symptomatic testimonies: Joshua Trachtenberg's mention of a discussion with "a very distinguished priest"' (1943: Introduction) and Pawel Jasienica's speech at the meeting of the Association of Polish Writers in March 1968 (quoted in Jelenski 1999: 137).

14 LaCapra refers to the concept of empathy understood as "heteropathic identication" (for detailed analysis see Silverman 1996) when he postulates that we need not only to "write about trauma" but also to "write trauma" (2001:40).

15 "With respect to historical trauma and its representation", LaCapra (2001:79) writes, "the distinction between victims, perpetrators and bystanders is crucial. 'Victim' is not a psychological category. It is, in variable ways, a social, political and ethical category " (LaCapra 2001:79).

16 n connection with the return of repressed psychological content, Freud writes the following: "distance is of no importance in thinking − [...] what lies furthest apart both in time and space can without difficulty be comprehended in a single act of consciousness" (1958:85).

17 Compare also the following description: "[the victims'] voices are essential if we are to attain an understanding of this past. For it is their voices that reveal what was known and what could be known; theirs were the only voices that conveyed both the clarity of insight and the total blindness of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifyirg reality. The constant presence of the victims in this book, while historically essential in itself, is also meant to put the Nazis' actions into full perspective" (Friedlander 1997: 2).

[18] It is characteristic for historians to unconsciously take over the terms of the tabooed language of the perpetrators, a phenomenon which has been often criticised (see Szapiro 1999: 10). Even though Holocaust historians are aware of the depersonalisation of the language ("[...] the key to the entire operation [of transporting Jews by railway to extermination camps] from the psychological standpoint was never to utter the words that would be appropriate to the action being taken," Raul Hillberg says in Lanzmann's *Shoah*, 1985:129); see also the statements of Holocaust victims Motke Zaidel and Icchak Dugin (Lanzmann 1985:9), and the language used in the report on the modifications in the trucks used for gassing people (Lanzman 1985:92−94)), the language used in their own analyses oftentimes aspires to the same quality (in this context cf. the description of the language used in the fundamental work *The Destruction of the European Jews* by Hilberg (1985) in LaCapra 2001:100,112, etc.), which is encouraged by the professional approach to issues discussed here (see also Friedenlander 1993: 130−134).

[19] On dealing with such issue see Vincenz (1993: 105), and also Bikont (2002): "This is a problem with which many Jews have had to struggle after the Holocaust. I myself remember discussions like that with one of my uncles in Israel − I could not comprehend how accepting death without resistance, walking towards it with an arm around one's mother or child can be see as unworthy".

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