

## Whose history?

*Encounters of professional and vernacular historians over contested heritage of WWII*

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### Abstract

In my article I take a closer look on the flows of historical practices across boundaries of professional historical discourse. It focusses on the example of the encounter between academic, public and vernacular history concerning the contested killing sites of WWII in Poland. I discuss the rich and confusing exchange about the Mirosław Tryczyk book *The Cities of Death* [*Miasta śmierci*] published in 2015. The book commentaries brought into the debate issues concerning the memory of WWII in Eastern Europe, public history, the definition of professionalism in academic history, and the relations between the public, academic and local circulation of historical knowledge.

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## Text

In 2015 Mirosław Tryczyk a local anti-discrimination activist, a PhD in Philosophy, an author of the book on history of ideas of XIX century Russia and a high school teacher published in a little known editing house a book entitled *The Cities of Death [Miasta śmierci]* (Tryczyk, 2015a).<sup>2</sup> It described mass murders of Jewish Poles committed by non-Jewish Poles in the Summer 1941 in Podlasie region in North-East Poland. With this book –he declared– he wanted to contribute to the cause of bringing justice to the victims, and to “erect a gravestone” (Tryczyk, 2016) for those of them buried in unmarked locations or insincerely commemorated.

The reception of the book involved many different and confusing aspects. The interviews with the author were published in main state-wide newspapers and the book was discussed by prominent scholars of Holocaust studies with different background. Some of them praised the engagement and the courage of the author (Zgliczyński, 2016), others offered negative but balanced reviews (Engelking, 2015; Żbikowski, 2015; Aleksion, 2016), but part of them, mostly historians, commented it harshly, making use of strong phrases like “the book is a shell” or “a great misunderstanding”, “pseudohistory” (Persak, 2016; Urynowicz, 2015). The author, supported by some of the reviewers, replied by denouncing them for pettiness and misreading of the book.

The question about the large and diverse reaction to the book written by unknown author and published in a small editing house push us toward a complex subject that

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intertwines the central questions of contemporary humanities. The book commentaries brought into the debate issues concerning the memory of WWII in Eastern Europe, public history, the definition of professionalism in academic history, and the relations between the public, academic and local circulation of historical knowledge. They seemed to resonate with voices in global historiographical exchange advocating the autonomy of history and reliability of professional research as well as proclaim the redisciplinization of history and rethinking of the specificity of historical studies. The debate is fuelled by the urge to react to the great challenges of contemporary world, with the demand for historical justice among them.<sup>3</sup>

*The Cities of Death* allured the commentators by its topic, personal engagement of the author and the shocking content. It touched on the first great historical debate in Poland after the transition, which concerned the participation of non-Jewish Poles in Holocaust. It was initiated by the book of Jan Tomasz Gross *Neighbours* published in year 2000 (Gross, 2000), which describe the mass murder of Jewish Poles by non-Jewish Poles in town Jedwabne in Podlasie region (Brand, 2001; Gross, 2003; Polonsky and Michalic, 2004; Forecki, 2010). *The Cities of Death* recount the wave of murders that run through the nearby cities in the same time. The facts reported by Tryczyk were already described by historians (Machcewicz and Persak, 2002) but the year 2000 debate generated a strong conviction that the events that took place in Jedwabne were exceptional and pushed the knowledge on the mass murders in other cities away to the peripheries of public debate.

In his book and comments the author linked the Holocaust with his family history (Kącki, 2015b; Tomczuk, 2015). Few years ago, he explained, in the village where

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<sup>3</sup> See for example special issue of *Critical Inquiry* from 2009 entitled “The Fate of Disciplines” (*Critical Inquiry*, 2009) or Ewa Domańska book (Domańska, 2012).

his family lived –which was also in Podlasie region, but 200 km to the south– a buried remains of Jewish Poles were discovered. The victims were the citizens of the nearby town murdered during the WWII. He have put together the unmarked site of burial with the anti-Semitism of his grandfather and father as well as the collection of old coins that he inherited and started to look for the information about the violence that took place in, as he frequently underlined, “family’s Arcadia” and the part that his relatives played in these events. Tryczyk declared that he did not have enough courage to make his findings public. Nevertheless he wanted to confront his personal heritage and undertook a research on the murders that occurred in the several other towns of the region. The author’s family history tied-up with the determined approach he undertook in the book declaring that he fought with “the lies and ignorance” (Tryczyk, 2015, p. 14) in the memory of participation of Poles in Holocaust got him attention and approval of commentators.

Finally, a shocking photos and accounts of the victims, witnesses and perpetrators were the key component of the reception of the book. The author repeatedly stated that he deliberately avoid rephrasing or excluding the fragments of the testimonies describing the cruelty of the perpetrators and humiliation of the victims, because he wanted to disturb the reader. It was his strong belief that only a powerful experience of confusion and anxiety among the readers might change the dominant schemas of war memory (Tryczyk, 2016).

The book attracted the attention of the public, but faced a strong negative reaction of the prominent Polish historians working in the field the Holocaust Studies. With the already mentioned harsh comments they offered a solid arguments that demonstrated *The Cities of Death* as a book bearing a features of an academic publication but unfit for the professional historiography. In short, the reviewers underlined that *The Cities of Death* was an unoriginal book

adding nothing new (with one exception) to the existing reconstructions of the events and their interpretations; it overwhelmed the reader with the excess of violent scenes; the testimonies and documents were employed in violation of discipline standards, including the use of archival materials despite their availability in published critical editions; the book had unclear structure –approximately 80% of the text were extensive citations of documents, frequently without any comment; it offered inaccurate one-dimensional explanation of the mass murders with unsatisfying argumentation claiming that the main cause of participation of non-Jewish Pole in mass murders was the anti-Semitic nationalist ideology; it contained incoherently presented hypothesis that the murders were planned. Moreover, because of its many defects, the potentially absorbing book corrupted the debate on the Polish participation in Holocaust, and contrary to author's expectations, it hindered the shifts of the frames of Polish memory of WWII (Urynowicz, 2015; Aleksion, 2016; Persak, 2016).

The main reasoning in the author's reply was the claim that the reviewers misread the book, since against their remarks it was not an academic monography, and consequently judging it according to scholarly principles was a mistake. In his opinion the academic writing –unattractive and distributed in small hubs– failed in their duty to commemorate the crimes on the Jewish Poles. He also suggested that while writing his book he was less concerned with reconstructing new facts or attempts at their interpretations, then converting the existing academic knowledge to historical representations which would help to bring justice to the victims and advance the working-through of the Polish memory of war (Tryczyk, 2016a; Tryczyk, 2016b).<sup>4</sup>

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4 "With this book I wanted to erect a gravestone for Jewish women raped and murdered in Bzury, Jewish community burned in Radziłów, pay homage to the Jews of Szczuczyn, Jedwabne, Kolno, Suchowola, Goniądz, Rajgród, Danów, Lipnik, Brańsk etc. murdered by their neighbours. Patriotism, as I

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir a prominent anthropologist whose studies focused on the anti-Semitism in Polish culture and the memory of Holocaust made approving remarks about *The Cities of Death* and offered interesting reframing of the debate. In two short comments, similarly to Tryczyk, she underlined the importance of the solid historical studies, rejected the arguments of historians criticizing *The Cities of Death* on the basis that they misread the genre of the book and gave an explanation of the differences between two sides of the dispute making use of theoretical model of memory provided by Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 2003). She discerned two steps in the work-through of the Polish memory of the anti-Jewish violence. The knowledge on mass murders in Podlasie produced and circulated by historians prior to *The Cities of Death* provided a historical description of the events erecting “a kind of a gravestone for victims”. Its installation fractured the domination of substitute memory, which pushed out the inglorious components of the past of community. This allowed for the next step, which consisted of establishing a critical memory and resisting the substitute memory –and here the *Cities* might be helpful. For this endeavour required participation of journalists, teacher, activists, priests, who would be able to transform historical knowledge into evocative representations and educational programs, which initiated the reframing of social memory. *The Cities of Death* were suitable for this task, because they consist of a large and varied amount of testimonies that expose the heterogeneity of memory including conflicts, negotiations and mutual circulation of different narratives about the past (Tokarska-Bakir, 2016a; Tokarska-Bakir and Kozik, 2016).

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understand it, requires from me to recount, to teach young generation history in the way that would alert them against totalitarian ideas historiand the outcomes of their fulfillment” (Tryczyk-Aleksion, 2016).

To begin with an attempt to draw conclusions from this exchange, I will add few words of my observations regarding *The Cities of Death*. Despite author's declarations and comments supporting his point of view this is not an evocative book. Firstly, it is too long and secondly, the records are quoted extensively, sometimes with no intelligible order and with no comment. Thirdly, the parts of the texts coming from the author reproduce the disadvantages of the academic style. The harsh reviewers led astray by a few accurately recognised features of the genre, incorrectly, as the author claimed, assigned the book to the category of academic study. Nevertheless he himself did not make clear to what other type of writing did it belong.

*The Cities of Death* may be identified as a hybrid of academic study, investigative journalism, reportage or popular collection of historical records. It fulfils incompletely the requirements of each of the genre. Similarly to investigative journalism, the book exposes the unrevealed "truth" about the anti-Jewish violence in Podlasie based on the investigation in archives. However its composition is not subordinate to the process of argumentation in support of the discovered facts and explanations. It bears resemblance to the reportage, because it addresses important social problem employing the accounts of the people engaged in it, nevertheless it does not have a lucid and attractive form. The book may also be describe as a geographically arrange collection of records, but then it seems redundant since most of the sources were already published in critically edited volume.

Following the comments indicating *The Cities of Death* as a popular vehicle for historical content the dispute might be understood as a conflict between academic and public historians. In *The Cities of Death* case two different definitions of public historian dominant in British and American historiography seem to be useful. In the American discourse a public historian is a university-educated professional that employs their academic skills to make professional

knowledge available to general audience. Whereas British model based on Raphael Samuel's with his History Workshop involves ordinary people from outside the academy, who record their local or personal historical experience and link it with the dominant national history often as a people's history or counter-history. Their tools of investigation are developed through mingling of academic methods and practices formulated in the course of work on the materials that come from local or family collections (Cauvin, 2016; Kean and Ashton, 2009).

Much the same as American public historians Tryczyk is an independent researcher with academic skills and capital but he popularizes professional knowledge outside of his discipline disobeying the code of practice of history. Close to British version of the figure he makes his historical undertakings personal by mixing it with his family history, moreover he claims that *The Cities of Death* are an attempt to generate the counter-narrative to ineffective accounts of professional historians. On the other hand he does not take on any original and alternative practices of research or historical representation.

The tensions between different discourses about the past that were reproduced during the dispute as well as the claim that *The Cities of Death* is a defective endeavour made from the standpoint of main historical hubs link it with the question of the relation between the professional and vernacular history. In my opinion the relation determines the whole exchange, though the participants did not refer to it. The term "vernacular" is usually used to indicate mother or native tongues of a given population when opposed to the official or standardized language. Vernacular history would then be, just like vernacular art or vernacular architecture, a practice rooted in local tradition, created by members of the local community without professional training. It combines standardized components of the historian's workshop



with its own methods conditioned by the cultural environment and individual life experience, memory, myths, fantasies and desires.<sup>5</sup>

Yet these practices are pushed out of the central domain of circulation of historical knowledge, because they do not fulfil the academic, aesthetic, moral or institutional requirements of scholarly writings and are labelled as deficient or clumsy. Nevertheless the connection between the professional and vernacular history is not a one-directional relation of hegemonial and subaltern, original and imitative, active and reactive, but it is rather a relation of mutual influence and multidirectional flow of knowledge, glossaries, trends and practices between groups with an unequal access to the financial resources, know-how and media. Vernacular historian compensates the shortages entangled with their position with larger amounts of work and time devoted to their studies.<sup>6</sup> This also one of the reasons, why she is a bricoleur busy with data and methods at hand.

The author of *The Cities of Death* does not seem to resemble the description of vernacular historian. He has an academic degree, gives interviews in nationwide prominent newspapers, and his book circulates in main stream reviewed by key scholars of Holocaust Studies. Yet his book seem to have vernacular features: awkward structure, unclear use of records, entanglement with the family history. Moreover, the debate over *The Cities of Death* ended up with author situated in affinity with the figure of vernacular historian. He found himself in this position, because his commentators placed him there (particularly Żbikowski, 2015) and he himself designed his self-portrait as an outsider-scholar.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Muchowski and Szczepan (2017).

<sup>6</sup> I refer here to the discussion of the term vernacular knowledge by Marcin Napiórkowski, Artur Szarecki, Paweł Dobrosielski, Piotr Filipkowski, Olga Kaczmarek (Napiórkowski et al., 2015).

In general vernacular and professional historian do not enter into an exchange of arguments. They trade ideas, archival findings, methods, glossary, but they do not have debates across the borders of circulation spheres. In result the streams of knowledge flow in parallel without bothering one another. I consider the practices of border patrolling and disciplinization, which became a substantial component of the debate over *The Cities of Death*, the outcome of the anxiety provoked by, firstly, the unclear identity of the book, and secondly, the obscure nature of the contested heritage in question which arouse emotional tensions. All of its participants advocated the solidity of historical studies and were concerned with „erecting grave-stones”, that is producing a “plain” unambiguous historical description of the events, indicating the good and the evil, and establishing the identity of victims and perpetrators. They also believed that discursive memorials will result in establishing material monuments in the locations of burials of the victims. However till now only three of fourteen locations discussed in the *Cities of Death* where memorialized according to the actual historical knowledge (few of the rest are false commemorated with the crime ascribed only to Nazi Germans)<sup>7</sup>.

Vernacular historians are mostly drive in their activities by the urge to preserve, deepen and circulate important – in their opinion – historical content recorded in a few documents kept in local archives or exchanged between the members of the family and neighbours in their conversations. This archival, family or local knowledge in their estimation should be included in the public discourse about the past. That is why they undertake historical practices engaging in complex relations with the professional historians.

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<sup>7</sup> The victims of anti-Jewish violence committed by non-Jewish Poles are commemorated in Jedwabne, Wąsosz and Bzury (the last one since July 2017, partly thanks to Tryczyk). Other locations mentioned by Tryczyk are: Radziłów, Szczuczyn, Skaje, Lipnik, Danowo, Dziegiele, Goniądz, Rajgród, Kolno, Suchowola, Brańsk.

In the Eastern and Central Europe, and probably in many other regions of the world, a frequent context for this kind of activity are practices generated around the localities, which following Polish memory scholar Roma Sendyka (Sendyka, 2013) I call non-sites of memory. She used Claude Lanzmann's (Lanzmann, 1990) phrase to describe the killing sites of the 1930s and 1940s, where difficult past remains in somehow latent state, and even if it engages the members of the community, the attitude towards it is not articulated in the public. Unlike memory sites which are described by Pierre Nora (Nora, 1989, p. 89) as recognised by the community and included in its identity imaginary, these locations have not been commemorated through monuments, gravestones, plaques, or have been commemorated, but "unsuccessfully" so. The unmemorialized killing sites, particularly the unmarked locations where the bodies were buried with no ritual, generate an unclear affective aura, which provokes practices of avoidance, concealment and destruction, but also of commemoration and search for the knowledge about war violence. They undergo multiple transformations, but the practices associated with them do not assume the form of official commemorative discourse. In this dynamic environment of mnemonic and identity tensions and anxieties, the agents of memory might emerge. These individual "guardians of memory" undertake diverse, often risky interventions into local memory – in the name of the other, moving beyond the implicit communal identity (Sendyka, 2016).

Some of guardians of memory living in the neighbourhood of unrecognised killing sites propelled by the urge to relate to them often look for the support in historian's toolbox. They use the tools of the trade to organise and deepen the knowledge passed on from generation to generation and discussed in conversations that keep recurring in the local community. Not only do they use the available knowledge of history, but they also carry out analyses of historical literature, archival stays, collect witness accounts,

and build collections of documents, photographs and memorabilia, while writing historical articles and books. The glossary, methods and forms of historical writing attract them as the default means to transform local knowledge into public knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Professional historians are pushed forward in their studies of contested killing sites by the same strong urge. It seems that the anxious aura surrounding the difficult heritage fuels not only the practices in vernacular history but also propels academic historians to guard the terms of the trade and the boundaries of historical field. Affects generated by these locations provoke the conflict between the previously separate discourses of historical knowledge over the right to speak truth about history.

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<sup>8</sup> On the urge to include local knowledge into public discourse see Kaczmarek, 2015.

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