



German aerial photo of June 27, 1941 "aktion" against Białystok Jews. On lower right the Great Synagogue has caught fire, with more than 2,000 Jews locked inside and burnt alive. Upper left corner is Plonaska Synagogue and surroundings burning.

A city of amnesia

MARCIN KAÇKI'S *BIAŁYSTOK. WHITE POWER. BLACK MEMORY*

by Jan Miklas-Frankowski

Marie-Claire Lavabre pinpoints the paradigmatic nature of Ricoeur's memory work concept as a process of emerging out of the illness of the past. It characterizes postmodern societies severely affected by Communism, Nazism or colonialism. Memory functions as the grieving process through updating the vision of the past in the present.¹ Similarly, LaCapra believes that the loss associated with historical trauma should be recognized and worked through.² After 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe the past encountered different and multiple stories for the decomposition and recomposition of national myths.³ In my opinion, part of the process of shaping memory can be observed in many examples of Polish contemporary literary reportage.

Literary reportage can be classified as a part of the broad genre of literary journalism⁴ and has an established tradition in Poland. A relationship between collective memory and fiction or non-fiction literature is hard to define unambiguously. However, it can be proved by an exceptional number of high-quality books of reportage on this issue edited in Poland.

Ryszard Kapuściński claims that a literary reportage "is a recon into different cultures and civilizations. An attempt to understand the behavior and attitude of people with different values. People we have to get to know if we want to understand the world we live in."⁵ Similarly, according to Waldenfels' phenomenology theory, a literary journalist is the Third, who speaks from the place of the Other; similar to "transitional figures such



Reportedly, several dozen Jewish children were thrown off the wagons through small windows when the train slowed down in the small town Łapy in attempts to save them from death in the gas chambers of Treblinka. Images from the short film *Castaways*, by LOGTV, 2012.



as the advocate, the therapist, the translator, the witness or the field researcher; they all intervene from the position of a Third without closing the fissure which opens between ourselves and the Other, between the own and the alien”.⁶

On the other hand, literary journalists’ work can be a narrative exchange between different linguistic and cultural communities. They create discourse about the ethical principles involved in the ‘exchange of memories’ and in ‘translation’ between cultures.⁷ That could guide action towards new forms of sociality and narratives of emancipation that implicitly rejects forms of oppression and violence. In fact, these books are an attempt to communicate and negotiate conflicting national memories. As a result, they extend Polish collective memory by making it multidirectional⁸ and compatible with different memories.⁹

A lot of Polish literary reportage authors have worked on the memory of the Holocaust or of Polish Jews: Hanna Krall, Anna Bikont, Józef Mackiewicz, Lidia Ostalowska, and Anka Grupińska, to name a few. Against this background, Marcin Kački’s approach seems to be particularly interesting. His book of reportage: *Białystok. White Power, Black Memory*¹⁰ on the one hand documents oblivion and denial of the memory of the former Jewish inhabitants of the city; paradoxically, on the other hand, it is a call for this memory to be restored.¹¹ In other words, we are dealing here with the two basic attitudes and forms of remembering historical trauma distinguished by LaCapra. The first results in the process of “working-through”; the other is based on denial and results in “acting-out”.

THE IDEA OF WRITING a book of reportage on Białystok – that was nominated for the prestigious Nike award in 2016 – was born in the publishing house Czarne, one of the most important Polish literary journalism publishing houses. In one of his interviews Marcin Kački reveals that the editors were curious whether “the media image of the Podlasie region, dominated by xenophobic attacks and swastikas that local prosecutors interpret as the Hindu symbols of happiness, is true”.¹² In Podlasie, a region that boasts of its historical and contemporary multiculturalism. In

Białystok – the city of the birth of Esperanto. The city which according to *The Guardian* and a European Commission survey from 2014 was the best city to live in Poland, better than Vienna, Barcelona or Prague.¹³

When Kački went to Białystok for the first time, he read *Tainted Landscapes* by Martin Pollack on the train:

Pollack broods in it about the places that have been erased from memory by architectural changes. He recalls places of execution that were intentionally masked by fields or forests. He asks an important question: whether such masking, covering, of memory affects the next generations. Can one be a good man without remembering history?[...] With the book in my head, I get off the bus somewhere in the center of Białystok at night, and I wander around the park and playground. Soon I will find out that under the park there are vertically buried matzevahs. The city erased them from memory, and I stood there with a question about Białystok residents.¹⁴

At first, Kački accepts Czarne’s proposal reluctantly, but immediately after his arrival, he is fascinated by this place: its atmosphere, people, secrets. “With each arrival it was getting more and more difficult for me to leave Białystok because it is a fascinating city, full of secrets, understatement, ‘metaphysics of the province’ and those ghosts that led me. Many of them were capricious, did not want to reveal their history, I had riddles at every step, but I feed on riddles”.¹⁵ One of the first dark mysteries, the solving of which begins the volume, however, concerns not Białystok, but the nearby town of Łapy, located on the railway route from Warsaw.

BIAŁYSTOK OPENS WITH “Łapy”, one of the most shocking reports of the collection and the most tragic episode in the history of the railway line Warsaw-Białystok, “whose embankment was reinforced in the 20th century with bodies of children.”¹⁶ When trains

going to the extermination camp at Treblinka slowed down in Łapy, desperate parents threw their children out of the cars. “There were only one or two windows in a car. Small, darned with barbed wire – you could stick out your head to take some fresh air, stick out your hand for water [...]. You could squeeze a child through.”¹⁷ Most of the “drop-outs” died right away, shot by German guards, who later forced Polish residents to bury the bodies in the railway embankment. “Today in Łapy no one can count how many children’s graves the railway embankment conceals. It used to be easier to count because grass would grow more vigorously on them, green used to be greener.”¹⁸

Today there is no trace of the Jewish children buried in the railway embankment; buried in nameless graves, they do not have even a symbolic tombstone. When one of the survivors from among Łapy’s Jews wanted to establish a monument to commemorate his family murdered during the war, right-wing council members refused, claiming that “a monument for one Jewish family would be too much”,¹⁹ and that, after all, there already was an obelisk “dedicated to the tragically deceased children”.²⁰

One of the older residents of Łapy and an activist in the Łapy Regional Society takes Kački to the monument which was supposed to commemorate Jewish children killed at the railway embankment, but after finding the monument located on the outskirts of the city, it turns out that it bears an inscription: “In memory of the Heroic Polish Children. 1968”.²¹ “The idea was to write ‘to Jewish children’, but the Party didn’t agree. Maybe it’s for the best because soon someone would probably vandalize it, and so it remained like this [...]”,²² the embarrassed tour guide explains.

IN ŁAPY THERE IS NO trace of the Jewish inhabitants of the city either. Only the oldest inhabitants remember them. Just lonely 70-year-old Zbigniew Siwiński remained, saved by his Polish foster mother, who raised him alone, avoiding any talk about his origin. Siwiński celebrates Jewish holidays, and he revealed his Jewishness in the local newspaper, but he wears a kippah only at home. After all, he lives a mere three hundred meters away from a priest who delivers anti-Semitic sermons. Kački also manages to find the only survivor of the Łapy “dropouts” – a “beautiful” Jewish girl. The whole city has heard of her; Kački’s older interviewees say that they sometimes see her, but others think that she is only an unreal urban myth. Yet the survivor herself does not want to talk; she closes the door and leaves Kački with unasked questions:

After all this effort, I can’t believe it went so easily because L. is veiled in some kind of mystery, but I’m going, I’m climbing the stairs, I’m knocking. The door

is opened by a short, stout woman, looking around 60 years old. [...] Slightly slanted, brown, shiny eyes. She must have been a beautiful baby when they untangled her from the clothes which she was bundled up in. She must have been a beautiful woman when under an assumed name she was hiding to sing the verses of the Polish national anthem. Or maybe not, maybe she’s very Jewish and, like Siwiński, she’s just celebrating Tu Bishvat?

– I have so many questions for you... I mean that train... during the war – I say excitedly. She cringes as if caught in a painful secret. Quietly but firmly she refuses and shuts the door.

I walk down the stairs feeling downbeat. After all these talks and fudging, a Jewish girl saved by brave people just closes the door. And my questions? Did her parents hide her in the oven? When did they tell her the truth, because they must have if the whole town knew? Did she look for her real parents? Has she got any children? What do they feel? Does she invite a priest for an annual visit [...]?

I walk out of the building. I want to go back upstairs once again. On the wall of a neighboring building, I see spray-painted swastikas, each a meter big. The little rescued Jewish girl also sees them every day. I’m leaving.²³

KACKI’S BOOK IS a reporter’s attempt to answer the question of what happened to make the media coverage from Podlasie “dominated by burning apartments, swastikas on walls, anti-Semitism, racism and football hooliganism”.²⁴ He roams the whole of Podlasie with this question in mind: how was it possible in a place where Poles, Belarusians, Tatars and Jews had lived side by side for centuries? He visits Jedwabne, abandoned and repressing the memory of the neighbors’ crime; he confronts an assessment of Bury’s activity among Belarusians and nationalists from Hajnówka; he is interested in both the inside story of the first Polish *in vitro* birth and the Eucharistic miracle in Podlasie’s Sokółka, but he gives the most space to the regional capital – Białystok.

According to Kački, Białystok is primarily a town which has “a problem with identity, because after the war it has written its history without a menorah and a mezuzah”,²⁵ which is most conspicuously symbolized by Central Park – the city’s landmark accessed by “the five most frequented streets connected with the largest roundabout in the city”.²⁶ “Three hectares of high lime trees, maple trees, manicured paths, benches, a playground for children. In winter, the park is used as a sledding hill. A year-round attraction”.²⁷ In 2014 Tomasz Wiśniewski made a short film to make the residents aware that under the park there is a Jewish

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Central Park in Białystok – Monument to the Heroes of the Białystok Land.

cemetery. “Under tons of soil hundreds of Jewish matzevahs stand upright, and under them are human remains wrapped in shrouds.”²⁸ All of this is the work of a city architect, Michał Bałasz, who didn’t know what to do with the ruined cemetery: “Just the rubble, these goats, and even drunkards shat on these gravestones; nobody watched. To be honest, let me tell you, I felt sorry about the cemetery, but nobody thought about digging it up, or moving it somewhere. I came up with the idea of covering it.”²⁹

Kącki wonders whether the cemetery was covered with rubble from the Ghetto or “maybe from the burned down synagogue, in which about two thousand people were burnt alive”.³⁰ In 1973, when the memory of the former purpose of the place was beginning to fade, a monument to the Heroes of the Białystok Land “fallen in the struggle for people’s Poland”³¹ was erected on a park hill, opposite the seat of the Provincial Committee. After 1989, people became less and less keen on the relics of the old ideology. In 2007, the monument changed its name to “White Eagle”. In 2011, a group of veterans attached meter-high letters to the monument to make the inscription: “God, Honor, Fatherland.” Although they acted illegally, no one has the courage to take the inscription off, and each successive court dismisses the case. The Jewish cemetery begins exactly at that spot with a motto which, in the common mind, is not associated with patriotism or military tradition, but with Polish national right-wing circles, usually averse to other groups, especially ethnic minorities.

BEFORE THE WAR, Jews accounted for half of the inhabitants of Białystok and were the most important socio-cultural element of the city. The marketplace and the center were all Jewish. “It was Jews who built this town, who actually made it, involved it in the civilization machine.”³² “The Jews were Białystok”,³³ and now they are hardly present in the architectural space of the city or in the memory of its current inhabitants. This clearly follows from research by sociologist Katarzyna Sztop-Rutkowska, who states that “the aspects that are a memento of communities that



Central Park in Białystok – view from the Opera and Puppet Theater. The park was established on the former Jewish cemetery.

lived in Białystok in the past (mostly Jews, but also Germans or Russians) are now completely marginalized [...], and the awareness of the legacy of these groups among the contemporary inhabitants of Białystok is negligible”.³⁴ Its domination, Sztop-Rutkowska writes, of “the symbolically largest group over minority ones”,³⁵ domination whose eloquent symbol is written in the motto: “God, Honor, Fatherland” on the site of a Jewish cemetery.

For the present-day residents of Białystok, the most internationally famous inhabitant of Białystok, Ludwik Zamenhof, is not a reason to be proud. Over the years, he was not commemorated except for a street name and a school (until 2001). Only in 1973 was a modest bust of the creator of Esperanto unveiled. When the World Esperanto Congress took place in Białystok in 2009, the hostile atmosphere intensified, and anti-Semitic comments appeared on the Internet. Before the Congress, an empty tent for Esperantists was set on fire, then Zamenhof’s old school, visited by Esperantists, was pelted with stones. Someone punctured the tires of the Czech delegation’s bus parked outside the school. During the Congress Zamenhof’s Center was set on fire, and a young boy poured pink paint on his bust under the very eyes of passers-by. Professor Andrzej Sadowski explains to Kącki that for Białystok inhabitants, Zamenhof is not a creator of a universal language which was supposed to bridge the gap between nations, but is simply a Jew. “The inhabitants of Podlasie are folk communities, who developed their identity in the countryside, where the concept of ‘ours vs. alien’ dominated, and a Jew from the town was alien – an innkeeper, a salesman, a banker”.³⁶ Ludwik Zamenhof was and still is an alien in Białystok. In 2009, the Senate of the University in Białystok failed to put to the vote a students’ petition to name Zamenhof a patron of the Institute of Sociology.

But anti-Semitism does not exhaust all xenophobic behaviors listed in Białystok. One should mention the football hooligans described by Kącki in detail – skinheads who are responsible for many misdemeanors and crimes, racial assaults and arson,

that are usually dismissed, as well as drawing swastikas on walls, which a famous Podlasie prosecutor, Dawid Roszkowski, interpreted as Hindu symbols of happiness and prosperity. Kącki also tracks down relationships between Białystok business, the “Jagiellonia” football club and the city authorities.

In this ocean of xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism, Kącki also finds people who resist the pervasive historical oblivion and void, who fight incomprehension and intolerance: community workers, scholars, cultural animators, defenders of old wooden architecture, LGBT activists, people who selflessly monitor racist and xenophobic graffiti on walls and on the Internet. Some of them were forced to leave Białystok and Podlasie; others are becoming more active against all odds.

KĄCKI HAS MADE Zamenhof’s idea the composition arc of *Białystok*. The book begins with a condensed picture of his life:

Ludwik Zamenhof, a sickly teenager, goes out to a bustling market in front of his home in Białystok. He sees Jews, Poles, Tatars, Belarusians, Germans, their bickering, fistfights. He listens to the language tumult which hinders understanding.

In the little Ludwik’s head an idea sprouts that all nations and faiths should be connected by a language. Common, accepted, neutral. A dozen years later he writes the first Esperanto textbook [...]. At the end of his life, when the cannons of World War I still thunder, he believes that people can still communicate, yet they need humanitarianism, freedom from “blind service to a nation, which turns into chauvinism, and blind obedience to the clergy, which turns into fanaticism”.³⁷

Zamenhof’s last words are probably the main reasons why, also according to Kącki, the Black Memory and the White Power so heavily appropriated Białystok and Podlasie. Unfortunately, the ending of the entire book does not sound optimistic at all.

Zamenhof’s idea of people living in harmony, symbolically contained in Esperanto, was carved on a golden plate in 1977, and placed in the space probe Voyager with greetings for alien civilizations. The probe passed out of the Solar System; it is twenty billion kilometers away from Białystok and is constantly receding [...]³⁸

BIAŁYSTOK AS DESCRIBED by Kącki is a city of collective amnesia and denial of the city’s Jewish past, struggling with nationalism and xenophobia. However, *Białystok* is not only a book about Białystok or the Podlasie region. From *Białystok* emerges not only an image of the city of oblivion and a multidimensional

description of its community but it is here, in the capital of Podlasie, that Kącki managed to observe, as in a microscope lens, processes growing in all of Poland, Europe, the world.

When the publishing house Czarne approached me in the summer of 2014 about writing a book on Białystok, I was not particularly convinced. I couldn’t find external stimuli. Everywhere was calm, cool, with no sign of far-right nationalism. There was a party in power that did not hold slogans calling for violence, there was peace in Europe.

And suddenly, while I was writing the book, something started to change. Not only in Podlasie and Białystok, not even in Poland, but throughout Europe. People are panting with hatred. Perhaps Podlasie is just a drop, showing a close-up of what this ocean of hatred looks like because this region is extremely affected by history.³⁹

Białystok is unique in its oblivion and at the same time, it is ordinary. It is unique because it was the only large city in today’s Poland where Jews constituted almost half of the entire population, and at the same time were the main cultural and social fabric of the city. And it is not unique, because the same processes (of course with a complex social, political and historical background) took place on a smaller or larger scale in Radom, Kielce, Chełm and many other cities, towns, and villages in which Jews lived, and therefore most locations in Poland.

THIS OBLIVION, moreover, concerns our entire region, all of Central and Eastern Europe.

When Ellie Wesel returns to his birth town, to Sighet Maramures (“It was to take me back to where everything began, where the world lost its innocence and God lost His mask”⁴⁰), he finds a different, alien city. The city which he remembers from childhood doesn’t exist anymore. In its place, a new one has grown: “A city that has denied its past is condemned to live outside of time; it breathes only in the memory of those who have left it”.⁴¹ Monika Sznajderman visits Radom – the city of birth

of her Jewish grandfather – with a similar experience. “There are many invisible cities in Poland, but Radom seems to be particularly saturated with invisibility. Nothing here resembles anything. Nothing fits”⁴² writes Sznajderman in ‘The Pepper Forgers’.

Radom, Białystok, Sighet, Łapy do not want to remember their Jewish past. Their former inhabitants are dead; the few who survived prefer to be silent. This is why Sznajderman writes about the imperative of remembering: “The silence is huge and spacious; you can sink in it. For that reason, I started to remem-

“RADOM, BIAŁYSTOK, SIGHET, ŁAPY DO NOT WANT TO REMEMBER THEIR JEWISH PAST. THEIR FORMER INHABITANTS ARE DEAD; THE FEW WHO SURVIVED PREFER TO BE SILENT.”

ber. Against the silence, against the oblivion, against the nothingness that wants to absorb everything”.⁴³

And against what Marcin Kącki calls ‘black memory’ or succumbing to ‘white power’ in the title of his book. Marcin Kącki managed to create not just an impressive multifaceted anthropological case study of the society of a contemporary Polish provincial city. On the one hand, from *Białystok* emerges the history of a city “without memory” and the shape of the whole Polish national community with xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism, while on the other hand it shows dissent from the oblivion, repression and domination of one nationalistic paradigm of memory. ✕

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