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JEDWABNE: ON EMOTIONS, POWER AND IDENTITY
IN ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH*

Jedwabne — a township with less than two thousand inhabitants in North–Eastern Poland is the place of my birth where I spent the first twelve years of my life. When I was no more than seven I heard from my elder school–mate a “secret” that was to me a sensation: “During the war in our town the Poles burnt all the Jews in a barn”. The impression was enormous — probably because I was not able to parse this sentence into elements that I could comprehend and imagine. For a long time afterwards “Jews” were to me a completely abstract notion. Apart from identifying them as human beings, I was not able to visualize them in any shape. Still, they existed in the successive scenes of the murder from long ago that the collective memory of Jedwabne disclosed to me as a child. The rumours and stories that reached me carried a moral lesson: one of them told about a rich old Jew whom the murderers surrounded near a pond and were drowned, and later, to recover his valuable rings, his fox–fur hat and boots(!) dived and drowned one after another. Its inherent warning that anybody tempted to find those golden rings is condemned to death in the water has many times come true, since those who drowned in the local pond were many.

Fascinated by the stories I heard in my childhood, in May 2000 I decided to study them from the perspective of a profes-

* After the first publication of J. T. Gross’s book *Neighbors* (in Polish: *Sąsiedzi*, Sejny 2000) in several discussions historians analysed the extermination of Jews in Jedwabne township organized by Nazis during World War II and the actual role of their Polish neighbors in this tragic event. The present study does not refer to those discussions, offering the personal feelings and reflections of the author, as an example of the problems which face the “oral history” researchers (Ed.).

sional — “a historian with an anthropological bent”. This meant that the image of Jedwabne preserved in my memory — the archetype of a small town — had to be seen face to face again.

I wanted to hear again “from below” and collect those stories about the murder which in primary school in Jedwabne was presented to me officially as the work of the Nazis, and another, “taboo” version of which I heard so many times, in various fragments, from “the other side”. I decided to do my research according to the “oral history” paradigm, which allows us to come in contact with a vision of the past that is alive in human minds, though it undergoes continual correction and “retouching” in the course of time and with changing social reality.

My plans almost miraculously coincided with the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’s *Neighbors*¹. Fortunately, in the summer and autumn of 2000, even after the first publications in the Polish periodicals “Rzeczpospolita” and “Gazeta Wyborcza”, the inhabitants of Jedwabne were still unaware that their township had stopped being anonymous and its name had acquired the proportions of a symbol of Polish shame. So I was justified in hoping that first — the people would be willing to tell me their stories, second — their accounts would not be influenced by the media and the political atmosphere that had arisen around “the affair of Jedwabne”. Another advantage of my position was the fact that I was an “insider-outsider” — at the same time a native and a researcher. To this problem I devote the present text, placing it at the same time in the context of methodological problems of research into “oral history”.

In the years 2000–2002, in Jedwabne, I carried out 16 narrative interviews (altogether about 60 hours of recording) with the present or former inhabitants of this locality — both Catholics and Jews. Among them were people from my own family, my relatives and acquaintances, former neighbours, but also persons whom I had never met earlier as well as Rabbi Jacob Baker, the spiritual leader of the community of Jedwabne Jews of the New York *Landsmannschaft*.

The problems that emerged at the stage of preparation for field research and in the interactions with my interlocutors, were connected with their persons, intentions and emotions as well

¹ J. T. G r o s s, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton 2001.

as my own person — a native-researcher, with my intentions, emotions and my own identity.

It seems that historians still cannot come to terms with the fact that emotions play a significant role in their work. Control and silence — this is how Charlotte Bloch characterizes “the emotional culture of the Academy”². The significance of emotions in the historian’s work has been extensively discussed by Leena Rossi and Tuija Aarnio. They enumerate the areas where the emotions of the researchers come into play. These are all the stages of the cognitive process: from the choice of the subject of research, through its planning, formulation of problems, choice of the theoretical perspective and methodology, collection of sources, up to the analysis, creation of the scholarly text, publication and polemic with the critics³.

Objects — material or intellectual (sources!), as well as people — the contemporaries and those of the past, alive or dead — all this arouses the historian’s emotions. Rossi and Aarnio argue, just as Jennifer Harris and Annie Huntington, that feelings can only help to deepen the whole process of cognition and to understand the hierarchy of problems⁴: “We all have feelings and they are part and parcel of researching, as they are of any other profession”⁵.

“Oral history” is a branch of historiography you cannot engage in dispassionately. A meeting with another person who long ago ceased being called an “informant”, but is named an “interlocutor” — consists, from the moment of the first contact, even if by telephone — of dialogue and exchange of emotions. A historian enters the area of private, intimate experience and somebody’s personal creation of the past — and at the same time the situation he has initiated is to the same extent his private and intimate experience⁶.

² Ch. Bloch, *Managing the emotions of competition and recognition in Academia*, in: *Emotions and Sociology*, ed. J. Barbalet, Oxford 2002, p. 122.

³ T. Aarnio, L. Rossi, *Feelings Matter*, “Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne”, vol. 37, 2007.

⁴ J. Harris, A. Huntington, *Emotions as analytic tools: qualitative research, feelings, and psychotherapeutic insights*, in: *The Emotional Nature of Qualitative Research*, ed. K. R. Gilbert, R. Baton, London–New York–Washington D.C. 2001, pp. 135, 137–138, 140–141.

⁵ T. Aarnio, L. Rossi, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁶ See A. Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison 1997.

A historian, and especially one engaging in “oral history”, just as an ethnologist or anthropologist of culture, enters a reality which to him is culturally alien. The burden of his own life-story — e.g. his ethnic origin, can remove this impression, since, as Wojciech Łukowski says “(...) it may mean that he could start his observations a long time before taking up research”⁷.

Accordingly, my “observations” started in my early childhood when I first heard of the murder at Jedwabne. Almost simultaneously, for in the first grades of primary school, I learnt another version: the teacher took the whole class to show them the site of this horror: a stone bore an inscription saying that here “SS and Gestapo murdered 1600 Jews from Jedwabne and its environs, by burning them alive”. We placed flowers at the foot of the monument, and lit candles, and later, every year, not on the anniversary of the crime — a point to be noted — but before All Souls’ Day, we repeated this rite of the official discourse of local memory. Since the experience of those two almost mutually exclusive spheres of collective memory was shared by me with the community under analysis, I was able to formulate the basic questions and hypotheses. So far my “autobiographical conditioning” influenced the process of my research only in an advantageous way.

The choice of interlocutors at Jedwabne and making them share with me their stories did not present any problems either, and I can even say that due to my background I could boast of a considerable success (if we take into account the informal race that took place between journalists to find an interesting respondent), when I was granted interviews by persons who categorically refused to meet the film-makers, representatives of the press, and television. For these people my local roots were a warranty of my honesty and reliability. The fact that I shared with them this dual — official and informal — collective memory made them drop their apprehension and opened their mouths.

Wojciech Łukowski says that “the fact that the historian starts his research with such an autobiographical burden must gradually increase his distance towards the object (subject) of

⁷ W. Łukowski, *Społeczne tworzenie ojczyzn. Studium tożsamości mieszkańców Mazur (The Social Creation of Homeland. A Study in the Identity of the People of Mazuria)*, Warszawa 2002, p. 26.

his research, of which himself he is a fragment”⁸. At the stage of preparation for those talks I managed to retain the indispensable distance without losing the ability to “decode” some principles, symbols and metaphors that emerge both in the narration and social situations characteristic of the local culture of Jedwabne.

However, I heard the first warning signal already during my preparatory work. When I started reading the book of records of the Jedwabne *Landsmannschaft* (*yizker-bikher*), what I had in my mind was a vision of a pre-war Jedwabne such as it was formed by my school education and personal experience of the historical area of that township, made up in the first place of the main Market Square with its dominating structure of the Catholic church and adjoining buildings and orchards of the vicarage and the Catholic House, the spacious chemist’s house, one-storey houses with licensed shops on the ground floor (the Jewish past of which nobody mentioned aloud), the manor-house of the local “heiress” standing aside, and the picturesque parish cemetery. One could easily visualize here the parish priest, the doctor with the chemist, and “the heiress” playing bridge together. To this should be added probably the most important feature of “my Jedwabne”, described in the article of the local historian, Jerzy R a m o t o w s k i, on the basis of which the local teachers presented the past of the township to the school children: “industrialization”, that is textile manufactories and their development in the 19th century⁹. Rajmund Rembéliński, who brought those weavers here, was an important figure in the political memory that the local authorities cultivated during Jedwabne’s heyday, that is in the middle 1970s — he even had his monument erected in the park surrounding the manor-house.

And here, while reading the *yizker-bikher* of the Jedwabne Jews I saw another Jedwabne. Mine — for its streets and places were familiar to me, but also not mine — for the names so readily invoked in successive stories — of the local, native families well-rooted in Jedwabne for many generations — were to me

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Jerzy R a m o t o w s k i’s article *Jedwabne. Ze wsi — przez osadę — do miasta* (*Jedwabne. Village — Settlement — Town*), published by the regional journal “Ziemia Łomżyńska” in 1986, can be read online: <http://www.lomza.friko.pl/ciekawostki/jedwabne.htm> (10.06.2007).

completely alien. And yet I was also a “local person”! It would be much easier for me to retain a “researcher’s distance” towards this picture if “my” Jedwabne and the one from the book of records were connected solely by topography. A historian frequently finds himself in such a situation when reading the sources. The scene continues to exist physically, but people and events the source describes belong already to another dimension. However, in this book I came upon the memory of Itzchak Yaacov Neumark who relates how running away from his persecutors he found shelter at the house of Doctor Kowalczyk. Doctor Kowalczyk was a figure from my own life and my Jedwabne. He assisted at my birth, I passed him in the street, I knew his house. He was at the same time a “historical” figure — well-set in the context of the distant past described in the memories of the Jews saved from the slaughter of 1941, and a figure very concretely inscribed in my own life.

“My Jedwabne” from before 1939 is a picture based on the official version of the history of a town from which the memory of Jews and their presence in its culture have been uprooted. This memory lived only at a mythical level and centred round one fact — the murder of 1941 and its real or imagined consequences. The Jews did not exist as physical persons either in the official version — in which they figured only as impersonal data, or in the mythological one. In the latter they were the archetypes of victims, their revenge from beyond the grave or instruments in the hands of God who administered a punishment for the crime related in many legends.

Doctor Kowalczyk — a person real to me due to my experience, and my emotions aroused by the record about him, made me see the past face to face, the past transmitted to me by this book of records: the past of the *shtetl* of Jedwabne and its Jewish merchants, craftsmen and their Polish neighbours. In this situation I could not retain the “researcher’s distance” and I can treat this as the first stumbling-block in the project of my research.

Interviewing turned out to be equally difficult — because of emotions aroused in my interlocutors by their memories and the fact that due to my background some situations turned into a contest of power-predominance between them and me. The aspect of “power” has long been present in the theoretical debate

of anthropologists as well as in “oral history”. Just as in the case of emotions, the question: “who has the power?” emerges at the very beginning of research process. For this reason, while looking for interlocutors, we frequently adopt a “snowball” strategy. The snowball is not rolling, however, at random — the person we have met brings us in contact with the next interlocutors he has chosen himself — it is the “key-person” who makes the decision who is important, whose account is topical and interesting, who will complement his relation, or the other way round — who will not imperil its integrity, and consequently its creation. The motives for indicating the next interlocutor are innumerable. They include a striving for gaining non-material profits: for example increasing the prestige of the “key-person” or strengthening some coalition in the local social system. I came across such situations during my work at Jedwabne. Although the interviews I carried out did not centre on the murder of the Jews — they were biographical interviews — I noticed that my “key-person” tried to direct me to those people who had already disclosed their opinions on that subject in public (interviews with them were published in the press), and presented in a favourable light the pre-war relations between the Polish Catholics and the Polish Jews at Jedwabne; or, to those with whom, because of their high social status at Jedwabne, he would like to establish closer contacts through my (*a historian from Cracow’s*) mediation. I dropped this form of choosing interlocutors and relied on my own acquaintances.

Another example of power that the respondent has over the researcher, especially when the latter is a “native”, is Gombrowicz’s famous “puerilization”. Some interlocutors who remembered me as a child, when I had finally persuaded them to grant me an interview, placed me in a child’s position. This is best expressed by the words: *That’s not for you. Better keep away from that*, followed by attempts to convince me that the subject I had taken up was too touchy (*You had better deal with some nicer stories*) and even too dangerous for me (*Better don’t go there, there are so many hooligans, For goodness sake, don’t ask about the Jews, unless you want to be stoned there [at Jedwabne]*)¹⁰.

¹⁰ All the quotations in italics come from the interviews carried out in 2000–2001.

Apart from treating me like a child, my interlocutor usually located me in the concrete circle of his family and friends in which was found (or, as my interlocutor assumed, might have been or will be found) some member of my family, and consequently he censured what he said. A flagrant illustration of this is an evasive answer and embarrassment in the face of the question I posed at the end of the interview about the illness of my grandfather, who was the best friend of Mr. J.O. and his wife. My grandfather suffered and died from TB in the early 1950s and I knew this disease was then — at least at Jedwabne — a taboo subject.

By the way, let me add that in those times — at the end of 2000 and the beginning of 2001 — I was not only “puerilized”, but also given a “face”. Active in this respect were journalists both of rightist and leftist Polish press for whom a professional historian, born and bred at Jedwabne and currently absorbed by this subject, was a promise of strengthening their thesis about the responsibility for the murder of 10 July 1941. Some assumed in advance that because of my Jedwabne origin I would join the ranks of the Defenders of the Good Name of the Town. I suppose I need not explain why I did not want to take part in the Jedwabne debate as a flag of a warship.

In my contacts with people my “face” of a “researcher” sometimes gained the upper hand of the “native”, and this produced various results: as a rule my interlocutors felt they were not authorized to speak out about the past in my presence, even if what they said would be their personal memories. Or they omitted the memories of their childhood or everyday life in favour of remarks about what they thought of as “history”, that is political or military events.

The most successful of my interviews — by reason of their significance and the factual material I gained — were in my opinion those where I perceived some “sound” balance between the attitude to me as an acquaintance on the one hand, and a listener/researcher on the other. These were my talks with my former neighbours from Jedwabne, with a distant cousin, with whom my earlier contacts had been sporadic, and with the friends of my long since deceased grandparents. The mechanisms activated in them were advantageous to me — I was identified as a person who could be trusted, and my interlocutors as

well as I entered the situation “researcher–respondent” without any problem. We retained the necessary mutual distance and no intense emotions, at least at the beginning, barred our contact.

The ethic code of “oral history” recommends: “Interviewers should guard against possible exploitation of interviewees and be sensitive to the ways in which their interviews might be used. Interviewers must respect the right of the interviewee to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or under extreme circumstances even to choose anonymity”¹¹. My talks with the people of Jedwabne inevitably led to the point where the problem of the murder of the Jews emerged. I tried to make this issue emerge in a most natural way, that is in the chronological sequence of my interlocutor’s life–story. Thus, in the case of Mrs. N.G. it was involved in the thread of her story about her Jewish neighbours with whom she lived side by side within the same premises in the so–called “Old Market Square” at Jedwabne; they used to invite her to have a snack and at their home, only once in her life, she had an occasion to be a guest at a Jewish wedding–feast. These memories aroused her intense and violent emotions. Roused by those pictures brought back to her mind, she sang a Yiddish song, (though she used to play with the children of her Jewish neighbours every day, she had earlier protested she did not know a word of that language). She started recounting how the rapidly–spreading rumour of the plans (she did not mention whose plans) concerning Jews made her family hide in the cellar and wait till the “situation” passed. Knowing I was a native of Jedwabne, she probably assumed I knew what she was talking about and did not explain what kind of “situation” it was. So I asked her point–blank, what happened to the Jews of Jedwabne, and she answered that they were burned in a barn. Who did it? — *Our people*.

The day after the murder, since “she was curious, and always wanted to know everything”, Mrs. N.G. went to the site of

¹¹ [Oral History Association], *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines*, <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/ccfriday/tools/oralguide.htm> (10.06.2007). The American Oral History Association first drafted the principles of practising “oral history”, including the ethical ones, in “Evaluation Guidelines” as early as 1968; since 1998 they have been largely expanded in face of new technologies and problems. The British Oral History Society also publishes the current directives concerning the legal and ethical principles of this research, see: http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/pub_eg.html, <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics/>.

crime, surrounded by gapers: *They were all piled up... they were not burned... they were stifled... They were grey, their clothes were grey... those at the top... you could recognize each of them... the faces, everything.* Here I asked the question if she had seen her neighbours among them. My interlocutor said: *Yes, it was them who were lying on top... in the corner... all of them* and she ran into emotions verging on a nervous break-down that is hard to describe. Although Mrs. N.G. agreed to my raising the subject of the murder, I still feel that I broke the ethical code by this question, since I could foresee — at least to a certain extent — such an emotional reaction. On the other hand, perhaps this was an oversensitiveness of a native-researcher? Because of this experience, although the interview provided a rich content of threads and meaning, I cited only a minute fragment of it in one short publication, which was rather a quotation of the personal memory of an inhabitant of Jedwabne than my statement as a researcher¹².

Hand in hand with the growing interest of the media in the “case of Jedwabne” and its inhabitants, the distance between me and my interlocutors, instead of growing, was shrinking. Conscious of the local conditions (the way things “were being settled there”) I felt that I understood my respondents’ fear of disclosing their attitude to the murder. Everybody I talked to pointed to the Catholics as responsible for the crime, and frequently mentioned their names. Even during our conversation some of the people expressed their anxiety point-blank: *Lest them come and burn our cottage.* This was augmented by their frustration with the behaviour of journalists, especially in 2001, before the approaching anniversary of 10 July 1941, who, in the opinion of the local people, manipulated their statements. I — as a native, was perceived as a person who was honest and would take “their side”. Their expectations connected with me, rarely put into words, and more often just signalled by their behaviour, can be termed as “an ideal granddaughter” (that is one who is interested to hear the accounts of the elders, but won’t disclose them to others), or sometimes perhaps, a “therapist”?

My position was also defined by accusations directed against me: after the investigation was started by Radosław Ignatiew,

¹² M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *My Jedwabne*, “Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry”, vol. 15, 2002, pp. 401–411.

the Prosecutor of the Institute of National Memory, long after my interview, my “key-person” was visited by an elderly lady who complained of being pestered by a prosecutor “sent” by me (I had no contact with him whatsoever). The same lady was very glad to talk with the press, but probably she did not have so much confidence in them as in me, and did not connect with them the expectations that made her feel “deceived” later on.

The violent reactions of my interviewees, their fear of my abusing their trust, created a situation where it was impossible to retain a distance towards the “object/subject of research”¹³. My later decision concerning the fate of my recordings depended largely on this impression. I used only their very minute fragments in two articles that appeared in English¹⁴. After I finished my research in 2002 I planned to write a dissertation on the dual collective memory of Jedwabne, but this would involve citing larger parts of the answers and disclosing the emotions with which they were charged. During my interviews I obtained my interlocutors’ consent to their publication; however, in the context of the turmoil that arose around Jedwabne in the media, I felt (this was perhaps an oversensitiveness of the native-researcher again) the interviewees might feel treated unfairly if their words appeared in print at that time; on top of that the authors could be easily identified by the community of the township, of which eventuality many of them were and continue to be afraid.

I have never published and never used in any way my six-hour interview with Rabbi Baker that took place in September 2001 in New York. In fact, this conversation was, in its turn, too intimate an experience for me, to be shared with the readers just in the period when the debate around Jedwabne reached its height. The Rabbi treated me as his *countrywoman*, and my visit as a symbolic gesture of Poles, which, in its turn aroused in me emotions I should like to avoid if I was to retain a “researcher’s distance”.

Therefore I consider my inability to retain a due, uncommitted attitude to my research on Jedwabne as my defeat as

¹³ Current “oral history” does not use the term “object of research”, and rather inclines to the concept of an active co-creation of research results, that is the “subjectivization” of respondents.

¹⁴ M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Imagining Jedwabne: the Symbolic and the Real*, “Polish Sociological Review”, vol. 1(137), 2002, pp. 113–116; eadem, *My Jedwabne*, “Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry”, vol. 15, 2002, pp. 469–474.

a scholar. I can also say that I have many times forfeited the occasion to speak out on this very topical and important subject, and at the same time derive a certain satisfaction from the fact that I have not transgressed against the ethical code in this project; the experience itself was to me a valuable practical lesson for my future work.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)