

# Three Types of Narrative

JACEK LEOCIAK

Institute for Literary Research, Warsaw  
Polish Academy of Sciences  
ibadlit@ibl.waw.pan

## Different witnesses' accounts depict the experience of the Holocaust – a “borderline event” leaving behind widespread trauma – in different ways, using different forms of narrative construal

Central to the work described herein is the concept of narrative attitudes: i.e. discernible and describable tendencies to relate stories of a certain type, to construe stories of the past in a specific way.

The source materials for this analysis were drawn from the accounts deposited at the Shoah Foundation Institute at University of Southern California in Los Angeles, which has amassed some 52,000 interviews conducted in the late 1990s with Holocaust survivors and witnesses. These archives contain a total of 1471 interviews in Polish, and 314 interviews with Polish individuals who assisted Jews.

The present author listened to more than 80 “Polish” interviews. My familiarity with the source materials, although incomplete, is representative enough to enable me to posit the first, still preliminary diagnoses and hypotheses.

In these interviews I identify three types of narrative, which I describe as “intelligentsia narratives” mainly because they reflect certain distinctive properties of the “intellectual condition.” Firstly – professionalism, involvement in a group of highly qualified specialists in a given field, secondly – fluency with various modes of expression that invoke cultural traditions, and thirdly – the conscious construal of autobiographical narration as being subject to literary and esthetic demands.

### The professional narrative

This type of narrative is exemplified by the interview with witness Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz, a historian of occupied Warsaw. There is a conflict here between two layers of narration: the historian’s professional knowledge (which can be checked, verified, supplemented, sourced, etc.) and his own individual, autobiographical memory of things experienced (which naturally manifests itself in narrative that is subjective, incomplete, unclear, fragmentary, blurred, etc.) A professional narrative typically shows concern for

accurately situating events in time and space and precisely identifying people (giving names, pseudonyms, organizational and political ties), as well as a characteristic tendency to try to “clear up” widespread beliefs, mistaken opinions, imprecise data, or controversial notions (e.g. the issue of the carousel just outside the Warsaw ghetto or standards flying over the ghetto during the uprising). This type of narrative is also strives to formulate conclusions that exceed beyond the purview of the witness’s personal, private experience, conclusions of a more general nature concerning the functioning of institutions, social groups, or human attitudes (such as evaluating the efforts made to fight *szmalcownictwo*, the practice of blackmailing Jews in hiding or their Polish protectors during the Nazi occupation).

Overall, professionalism (here the status of a professional historian) triggers a certain “professionalization of memory.” The narrative unfolds amidst tension between private/autobiographical memory on the one hand and critique of sources and the duty to be objective on the other; between the individual perspective, the subjectivity of perception, the private viewpoint on the one hand, and a higher-level perspective striving for objectivity (expanding

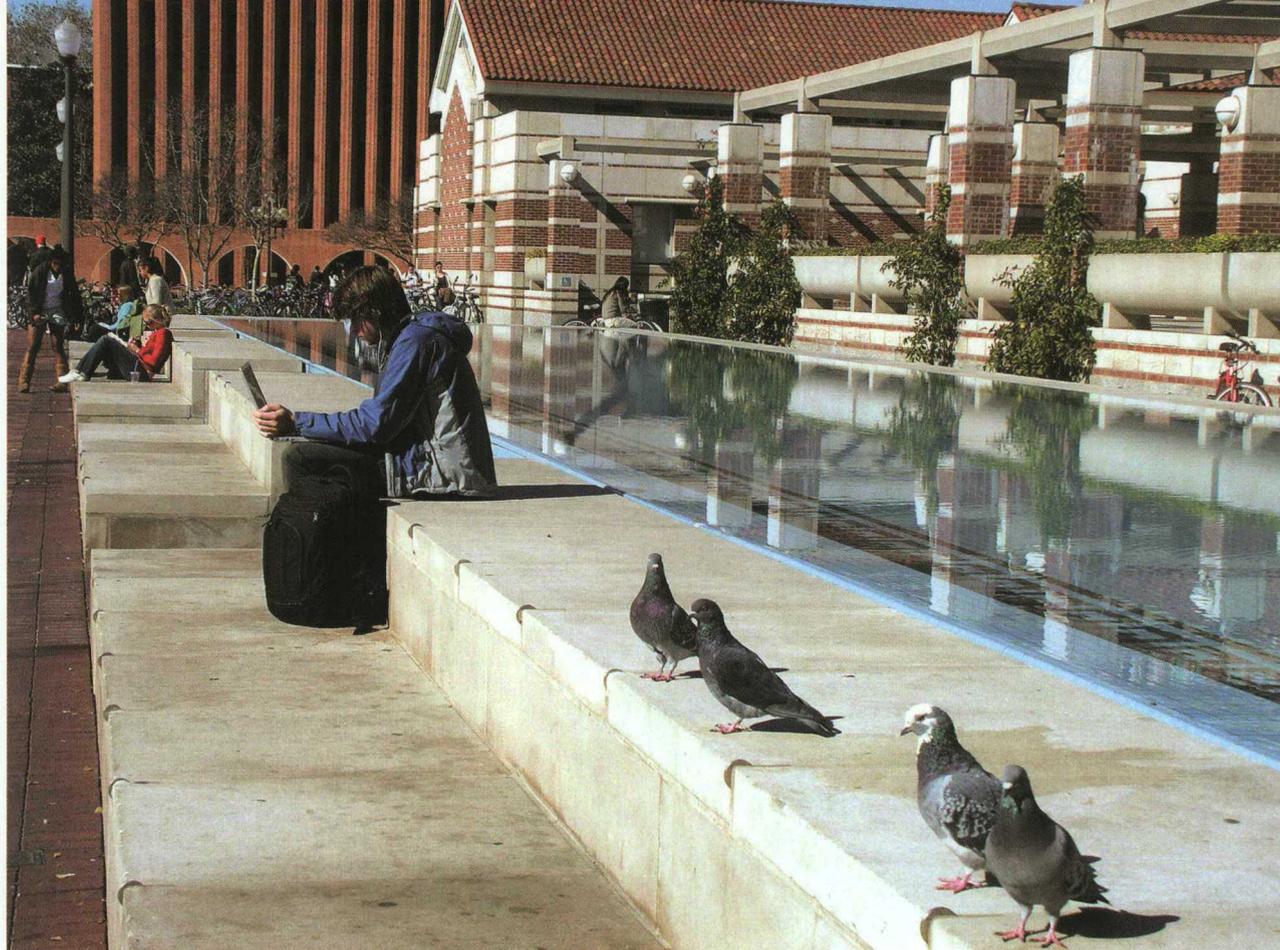
## Interviews with Holocaust witnesses evidence different approaches to discussing this “borderline event”

the scope of reflection, reconstructing collective memory based on many different sources) on the other.

### The storyteller narrative

This second type of narrative can be found in the interview with Stanisław Frybes, who stresses the traditions of his native region, “Galicia’s community of nations and religions.” His manner of speech befits that heritage: he employs a storyteller’s style, free in form and rife with jokes and anecdotes, digressive and repetitious, often addressing the listener.

The closest genre model for this type of narrative seems to be the *gawęda* – an oral genre of Polish folk literature, characterized by freedom of composition and rich in digressions. Here, in speech that represents the outcome of an interview, the *gawęda* in essence returns to its roots as an oral tale. Impassioned speech overflows the boundaries set by a concrete answer to a concrete question; the tale flows briskly, disrupting the formal interview framework and the chronological order imposed by the interviewer.



Jacek Leociak

The ground floor of Leavey Library, University of Southern California, houses the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education

The interview situation nonetheless does make an indelible mark on this type of narration, making it better described as a “constrained *gawęda*.” We can observe here a clash between the impetuous core of the oral *gawęda* and the fixed rigors of an interview, between free composition and formalized interview structure set by the previously composed questionnaire. The expectations and dispositions of the witness and the interviewer come into collision.

The storyteller narrative specifically harks back to later development of the *gawęda* oral folktale into a storytelling genre by Poland’s *szlachta* nobility, and thereby invokes the direct historical antecedent of the intelligentsia social stratum – which sprang mainly from the impoverished nobility and *déclassé* landed gentry. This style of narration also encapsulates a certain vision of the world, distinctly emphasized in the message formulated at the end of the given interview: the traditions of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a multiethnic, open, and tolerant noble republic.

### The novel-like narrative

This third type of intelligentsia narrative, exemplified by the story told by witness Jerzy Koźmiński, strives to build a certain “represented world.” It yields to compositional and dramaturgical rigors and is couched in a literary language with traits that situate it on the borderline between spoken and written Polish.

The represented world of this story is filled with individualized personalities. The narrator manages to characterize them very distinctively, albeit quite succinctly, by capturing some important detail of their appearance, behavior, manner of speech, etc. He is able to interestingly

characterize the relations between the protagonists of the story (between Poles and Jews), as well as to portray their individual traits. The main storyline is interspersed with commentary, reflection, and evaluation. The stress is laid on the dynamics of the related events. There is an evident concern for stressing temporal and causal links. Dialogues are used to dramatize the narrative.

Novel-like narrative signals that the life being recounted here appears only as a consciously devised narrative construction, dovetailing with literary traditions. Biography is treated as a text, and as it is recounted the narrative “I” yields to creative processes. This type of recounting one’s own past experiences seems to fit well with a certain characteristic property of intellectual discourse: an awareness of not just one’s own distinctiveness, but also forms of expression used in communicating with the world and in self-presentation. ■

### Further reading:

- Jedlicki J. (2001). *O czym się mówi, gdy się mówi o inteligencji?* [What Do We Mean When We Speak of the Intelligentsia?]. [In:] Kowalska H. (Ed.). *Inteligencja. Tradycja i nowe czasy* [Intelligentsia – Tradition and New Times]. Kraków: WUJ.
- Mikułowski-Pomorski J. (2001). *Etos warstw społecznych. Inteligencja. Między państwem a samodzielnym wyborem* [The Ethos of Social Strata: The Intelligentsia – Between the State and Individual Choice]. [In:] Kowalska H. (Ed.). *Inteligencja. Tradycja i nowe czasy* [Intelligentsia – Tradition and New Times]. Kraków: WUJ.
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- Yow R.V. (2005). *Recording Oral History. A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Second edition*. Altamira Press.