

Interview with Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Anna Zawadzka

Leaving Tracks Uncovered



Patrycja Dolowy

The Ethnographic Archive's research projects share a distinct approach to recording reality. From left: Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Anna Zawadzka

Academia: As a group of female researchers – anthropologists, sociologists and one theologian – you have set up the “Ethnographic Archive,” a fully independent female research team. What does your work deal with?

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir: Our group largely studies Polish-Jewish issues, although not exclusively so. What the different projects have in common is a distinct approach to recording reality, in a way it is not usually depicted. This is an ethnographic method most associated with Pierre Bourdieu (French sociologist and anthropologist, creator of the theory of symbolic violence) and in a certain sense with

feminism – seeking an identity closer to life and authenticity.

It all started with blood-libel myths, a project that led to last year's publication of the book *Legenda o krwi. Antropologia przesądu* (Blood Legends – The Anthropology of Superstition).

J.T.-B.: The blood-libel myths include the belief that Jews used to kidnap and “draw blood” from Christian children. We wanted to check in the field whether any trace of these myths could still be found in the Sandomierz region, where paintings representing Jews “drawing blood” from a Christian infant are still hanging on the Cathedral wall.

What did your research reveal?

J.T.-B.: We were surprised to find how pervasive the myth was. It turned out to be in circulation on all cultural levels, among family, friends, and congregation. Astoundingly, it was recounted by members of the elite: clergymen, artists, teachers, conservators, the diocesan curia, regional historians.

Were the conclusions unequivocally negative?

J.T.-B.: No. The findings were heartening in some places. The clergymen were an interesting case. Zuzanna Radzik, the theologian on our team, talked

to them. This was a very interesting, reasonable discussion until the point when she provocatively remarked that the painting was still hanging there in the church. Their reaction was of a kind we always encounter when dealing with blood-libel myths: If the picture has never yet been taken down, if so many Church leaders, certain popes, writers, and our fathers were convinced of its truth, then what can I do to help it? This is an issue of upbringing, something characteristic of traditional society and culture. Questioning it takes heroic effort, and that effort is frequently made.

For example, take this recounted story of a pre-WWII event: it was a holiday and the Jews in a certain shop were closing up their shutters (as required by canonical law when a procession was meant to pass by). One of the individuals inside was frightened by the slamming shutters, afraid to end up locked inside and turned into matzah bread. The woman who told us the story laughed at that person.

These oldest threads of the myths still surface in contemporary stories. Even ones set more recently than the prewar period.

J.T.-B.: Yes, that is why we are talking about this. Stories of this type, about nonexistent things, form a distinct genre of folklore – memorate or fabulate. This is very frequently not the account of an eyewitness, but of someone close to them or someone who traveled with them. For instance, someone's grandmother talked about how as a child she was walking on the road and was nearly kidnapped. She mentioned what the weather was like, what shirt she was wearing. Such details are extremely important, lending credence to the story. The schema becomes rooted in memory and essentially becomes irrefutable. We can suppose that it is this vague status of the "matzah made with blood" stories that makes them seem indestructible. Certain elements in them may be replaced – in someone's interpretation banks might play the role of barrels

and bank loans might take the place of thorns inside the barrels – but the "Jews as bloodsuckers" schema persists.

How did you react to those stories?

J.T.-B.: I had the concept that the place we lived needed to be protected, because the field would ultimately become "closed off" and we would need this last place for ourselves. That proved to be true. After a week of research, our group was rejected in the field – we were rumored to have been sent in by Jews who wanted to recover assets. Then we needed to work among ourselves, coping with the experiences that were new and horrifying for us. Drawing up results and finding an

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outlet for the experiences of fieldwork are very important elements of ethnographic technique. The individual to whom the most work is devoted in ethnological studies is the researcher himself or herself. Usually the researcher later covers up the tracks of such work, but our practice after coming back focused specifically on not covering them up. More and more questions arose: Is the Sandomierz region unique, or are things similar in the rest of Poland? And so a team consisting of eight brave women emerged. Information on the projects can be found on the website www.archiwumetnograficzne.edu.pl.

You started with Sandomierz, but continued with more trips and projects, including one with the working name "Żydokomuna" [pejorative historical term for Jewish-Communist conspiracy].

A.Z.: The next expedition was to the Podlasie region, where we tested three hypotheses. We wanted to test why the image of Jews in the memories of Podlasie residents is better than in Sandomierz. Before WWII, eastern Podlasie was a place of much party

activity. Due to the proximity of the Soviet Union, communist agitation was intense there. Because of internationalist ideas, the attitude toward Jews may have been less marked with anti-Semitism. The second hypothesis was that a different approach to stereotypes had developed due to experience with another minority – the Belarusian ethnic and religious minority in the area. Our interviews showed the latter hypothesis to be defensible, while the former remains unclear.

J.T.-B.: The interviews refuted a third hypothesis that was professed by Orthodox individuals, namely that Orthodoxy is a religion that precludes anti-Semitism, that anti-Semitism is re-

lated to Catholicism. Our research did not indicate this. The local cult of St. Gabriel is nothing other than a vehicle for anti-Semitism. Just considering these hypotheses was itself very interesting.

A.Z.: The idea arose to expand our research into the first hypothesis. We are seeking answers to the questions of whether leftwing political engagement lifted barriers between Poles and Jews, how the "żydokomuna" concept originated in colloquial and political language, and what sort of costs (professional, community, family) were faced by individuals of Jewish origin for joining the leftist movement.

How did Jews come to be identified with communists; how did these two concepts cease to function separately?

A.Z.: The very process of seeking an answer to that question is extremely important. Two stories serve to illustrate the "żydokomuna" phenomenon quite well.

One of them is about Samuel Willenberg, who was involved in the Treblinka camp revolt and then the Warsaw Uprising.

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He was forced to leave the Home Army (AK), facing death at the hands of his fellow AK members for having revealed his origins to them. Wanting to continue to fight in the resistance, he joined the syndicalist Polish People's Army. The other story is about Abraham Zlotnicki from Klimontów, murdered by Poles in 1945 together with a group of other Jews who had survived the Holocaust. Today the official version of this story is that Zlotnicki collaborated with the Soviet secret police and was therefore liquidated. But why is there no evidence of his collaboration, might he have simply asked the police for assistance in recovering assets seized by Poles, and why did the Polish anti-Communist underground "preventatively" murder five other Jews as well, including a pregnant woman? The "żydokomuna" slogan enables one not to ask any of the above questions. Instead it offers a stereotype: if someone was Jewish, they were a communist. After that assertion, one has to ask another inconvenient question: Why was it permitted to murder communists? We are trying to identify people who were leftwing activists before WWII. Nowadays being a communist is taboo. The people we call up and ask for an interview frequently feel as if they have been "denounced." Fortunately, quite a few have agreed to talk to us. Using the ethnographic interview method, we try to find out whether leftwing political involvement instilled a sense of community across nationalities. We do not ask such a question outright until the very end, enabling us to first find out many details about the lives of our sources.

J.T.-B.: Before research begins, a scenario is developed. A scenario is mainly a tool to help us prepare ourselves to conduct interviews. Then we do so without revealing that there is any set list of questions. While we are working and processing the material later, certain "loose ends" remain which cannot be dealt with according to academic techniques, but which it would be a shame to leave out.

Krzysztof Pacholok



What researchers need is not so much art as visual tools. Here: the interviewee Józef Maksim from the Zamość region

And the best method for handling those "loose ends" is video material?

J.T.-B.: We try to make certain that things are organized, that there is always a part of the project which strictly adheres to academic discourse. However, the route by which conclusions are reached is also important to us. We do not want to cover up those tracks, and so we have to preserve our research materials. A good way to do so is what we call "visuality" – video material, fragments of conversations, things that are unfinished but provide food for thought.

You have invited artists to collaborate, but there is quite a difference in how you construe the significance of film as a tool. That triggered a conflict that gave rise to the project "Pseudo" (dir. Alicja Plachówna).

J.T.-B.: What we need as researchers is not so much art as visual tools, with their ambiguity and cognitive breadth. We follow an iron rule: we never film our first conversation, just after we arrive on location. We are anxious to

"gather" knowledge from reality, not to confirm our own notions.

A.Z.: For me, two things are important in the film "Pseudo": the first is a conflict at the intersection of science and art. Artists accuse scientists of over-intellectualization. At the same time there is a prevailing stereotype that art – as a field that demands intuition – is a feminine domain, while science – demanding rational thought – is male. When artists accuse us female researchers of over-intellectualizing, consciously or not they are invoking the stereotype that by doing science we are disavowing our true, female nature. The other issue is the presence of women in the world of science, how they are perceived. There are still not many female researchers who are well known and seen, rewarded with prestige. This is a question of costs.

Many women are aware of those costs, and for example choose a research career instead of starting a family.

A.Z.: That's right. But conscious individual decisions do not resolve the

problem on the level of social reproduction. A decision formulated in that way is tinged with the conviction that motherhood is a woman's true destiny – a destiny that can be shirked. The point is that a man does not have to make such a choice because the burden of responsibility for his child does not rest on him, a choice between science and parenthood which women frequently have to make and suffer the costs of, regardless of what they opt for. That is why the problem needs to be posed differently: what are the consequences of the fact that culturally men are not burdened with responsibility for the well-being of their children?

Perhaps political solutions will be enough, changing the social consciousness, mandatory paternity leave time?

A.Z.: Such measures are a good idea, but the problem lies much deeper. This is about the attitude towards women, how they are perceived. When I was a student, the lecturer at a class on the history of ideas asked us who Hanna Arendt was. An answer came from the class: "Heidegger's lover." Everyone laughed. When a woman reacts to such situations, she gets accused of being excessively emotional. This is something that comes with one's own embroilment. Analogous to Jewish origins when one reacts to anti-Semitism.

J.T.-B.: In the classroom, it is essentially unheard-of for a girl to speak out in a tone that is not androcentric, presented as if it were universal. For her to manifest her femininity, her different perception of the world based on gender, and to defend that "bias." Unlike men, women usually first have to demonstrate that they deserve to be able to speak in public in the first place. To that end they arm themselves with a kind of pseudo-universality, speaking in a "male voice." Hannah Arendt also spoke in a male voice. In the history of philosophy, she is an exception confirming the rule that women are excluded from philosophy,

a "woman with a mustache," an anomaly. The answer that came from the class reinstates the "natural order." It subordinates Arendt back the role she escaped from. A woman should be a mother, wife, or lover. We, the witnesses of the event, laugh at it.

The academic community is more conservative than one might expect.

J.T.-B.: It is very hierarchical and cannot stand scrutiny. Moreover there are changes within civilization as a whole. As the photographer Lauren Greenspen remarked, in 1800 being a good girl meant being moral, whereas today good looks have become the highest form of feminine perfection. Internalizing the "obligation to be pretty" means that aside from the patriarchal environment, a woman has one more enemy within her and against her. We are observing something like a regression from what was already previously achieved, both within the research community and through the efforts of suffragists.

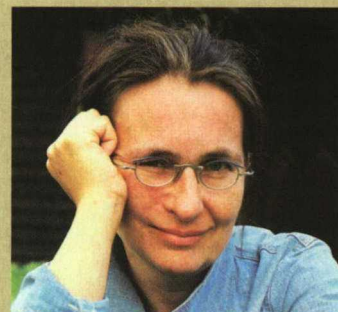
Is this the fault of men or of feminists, failing to caution against it?

A.Z.: Let's not talk about blame. It is an issue of androcentric social structure, which is something more than the sum of individuals, their views, intentions, and ignorances. I am amused by arguments along the lines of "women themselves like to be appealing, no one is forcing them" as evidence that the assertions of feminists make no sense. This argument is reminiscent of the age-old formula of anti-Semitism: a Jew making anti-Semitic remarks is considered to validate the notions of anti-Semites. Meanwhile the strength of social structure lies precisely in the fact that all of us – including those discriminated and humiliated by it – recognize it as obvious and the only possible one.

J.T.-B.: Both men and women are embroiled in this structure. With all suffer the consequences. Things are similar with anti-Semitism. That illustrates the

connectedness of the research topics the Archive deals with.

Interviewed by
Patrycja Dołowy
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Warsaw, 21 October 2008



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Anna Zawadzka – a sociologist, journalist, social activist, and graduate of ISNS and the Social Sciences School, Polish Academy of Sciences. She has authored many articles on social and popular-science issues.