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SEPARATE NARRATIVES: POLISH AND JEWISH PERCEPTIONS OF THE SHOAH

On May 1, 1943, Simcha Rotem, an activist of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) in the Warsaw ghetto, together with another underground fighter, was smuggled through the sewers into the "Aryan" part of Warsaw, in a desperate attempt to make contact with the Polish resistance. The uprising in the ghetto had started two weeks earlier, and the fighters were desperately short of everything: guns, ammunition, and hope. Only a coordinated action on the other side of the wall could delay the impeding defeat. Years later, speaking to French movie-maker Claude Lanzmann in his film "Shoah", Rotem described his first impressions:

"Early in the morning we suddenly found ourselves in the street in broad daylight. Imagine [us on] that sunny May 1st, stunned to find ourselves among normal people, in the street. We had come from another planet. […] On the Aryan side of Warsaw life was going on in quite natural, normal fashion. The coffee-shops were open as normal, the restaurants, the buses and trams, the cinemas were open. The ghetto was an isolated island in the midst of normal life."[1]

Rotem's mission ended in failure, but his words open up a valuable perspective on one of the reasons why Poles and Jews have such

1] Claude Lanzmann: *Shoah*. Paris 1985, Fayard. All translations mine.

different perceptions of the events of WWII in Poland. Apart from the well-known and important, mainly conscious distortions motivated by self-interest, essentially on the Polish side, of which more below, there is the very important issue of differences of perception caused by the very different circumstances of the two groups. The Jews, in Poland as elsewhere in German-occupied Europe, were to be totally exterminated, down to the last child hiding in the woods, and the plan was largely implemented. The Poles, on the other hand, were to be reduced to slave labor, and this goal was not fully achieved by far. These differences in circumstances account for the differences in perspective: not for the first time it transpired that a shared geography does not necessarily mean a shared history. Polish and Jewish narratives on WWII differ significantly.

Those Jewish underground fighters emerging on that sunlit Warsaw street came from just a few hundred meters away, but indeed, as Rotem himself says, they could have come from a different planet. The fighting triggered by the uprising had turned the Warsaw ghetto into an inferno of death and flames, but the two and a half years preceding the uprising, from the time that the Germans had created and sealed the misnamed "Jewish residential district" in the Polish capital, had been a steady descent into that inferno. Famished and lacking the most basic medical services, surviving in unheated apartments during the bitter Polish winters, and subject to constant violence at the hands of the occupying authorities, the inmates of the Warsaw ghetto experienced a fate much more similar to that of concentration camp prisoners than to that of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the city on the other side of the wall which had divided them since November 1940. In fact, it can be argued that the difference in the fate of Warsaw's Jewish and Polish inhabitants was greater that which separated the experience of the latter and that of the inhabitants of, say, the French capital, also occupied, but subject to a far less stringent occupation regime, or even of the residents of unoccupied parts of Europe. This statement holds true even if we were not to consider the two most traumatic moments in the ghetto's brief history: the uprising itself, and the *Grossaktion* of the summer of 1942, in which in a matter of weeks a quarter of a million Jews were transported from the ghetto to their deaths in the extermination camp at Treblinka. Again, Rotem's metaphor rings true: the ghetto was an island, belonging not to the "normal world" but to the archipelago of the camps.

But was the "Aryan side" of Warsaw itself part of that "normal world"? For Rotem – definitely. Coffee shops were open, trams were running, there were no dead bodies lying on the sidewalks. From the perspective of someone who had just emerged from the inferno of the ghetto, "Aryan" Warsaw was to all intents and purposes a city at peace. Yet to have that perspective one indeed needed to have come from the other side of the wall. For its non-Jewish residents, the "Aryan side", coffee shops and all, was experiencing the most brutal occupation regime in the Polish capital's long history of suffering oppression. The German forces routinely conducted roundups of people on the streets, in part to prevent underground activity, but mainly to capture slave laborers for work in Germany: some 15,000 people were captured in that manner in a series of roundups on January 5–7, 1943, though most were subsequently allowed to return to their homes. The occupation authorities also routinely took hostages, to be executed in retaliation for acts of violence against German soldiers: on January 9 a German poster informed the public that two hundred "Polish activists" had been thus arrested and would be subject to "severe measures" – meaning execution – if such attacks continued. In a mass execution on February 12, seventy people were killed in retaliation for a Polish underground shootout with the German police six days earlier, including all the inhabitants of the building in which the shootout had taken place, who had been summarily arrested.[2] These were but the first acts of 1943, and the brutality of the occupation regime was only to escalate. Warsaw part of the "normal world"? Hardly. And yet it is surely not surprising that Rotem, with his experience of a nightmare incomparably greater than what the Polish residents of the capital were suffering, thought otherwise.

More puzzling is the seeming indifference of some Poles to the enormity of the Jewish suffering. The merry-go-round which stood by the walls of the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943 and continued to provide entertainment to many Warsawers as the insurgents fought on the other side of the wall and the ghetto was engulfed in flames was a case in point. Even more shocking, perhaps, is the sole reference to the ghetto in the wartime memoirs of Agnieszka Hulewicz Feillowa, daughter of a prominent musician and underground activist sentenced to death by the Germans. Describing her wedding day in 1941, she notes: "We made a mistake en route to the church and ended up in the ghetto.

2] Władysław Bartoszewski: *1859 dni Warszawy*, Kraków 1974, Wydawnictwo Znak.

The German police wanted to arrest us. It was very nerve-wracking and we were late for church."[3] This is all – in a book over two hundred pages long. Though it would obviously be wrong to make generalizations on the basis of a single quote – in the case of either Hulewicz or Rotem – these two do have illustrative value and seem indicative of segments of Polish and Jewish opinion. In both cases the emphasis is on the suffering the communities they represented had themselves experienced, and there is much less interest, bordering on indifference, in the suffering of others.

We tend to find this shocking, because we would like the opposite to be true, in accordance with the maxim that suffering ennobles. Yet, as William Somerset Maughan had already pointed out in *The Moon and Sixpence*: "It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering, for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive." Without going to the extreme suggested by the eminent English playwright, it would seem fair to argue that suffering makes many people less, and not more, inclined to notice the suffering of others, let alone inclined to take action to alleviate it. In other words, suffering alters perception. The above quotes give fair illustration of that. But, coming as they do from eye-witnesses of the most atrocious crime in history, they represent not only the exemplifications of a counter-intuitive human psychological trait. These are among the raw foundations of collective memory, which itself constitutes the building blocks of history. In other words, the way that Poles and Jews remembered the events they witnessed in German-occupied Warsaw shaped the way the history of these events would be written, yet it seems clear that, in some cases at least, very important elements of that history were, for psychological reasons, omitted in the original accounts. What we read today, then, might be a faithful account of what the eye-witnesses remembered – but their memory of the events might be substantially flawed.

None of this is new, of course: historians and lawyers have learned to treat eye-witnesses warily, not only in cases where they might be suspected of intentionally distorting their depositions (such distortions are also easier to detect), but where the eye-witnesses themselves are not aware of any selectivity in their accounts. Yet both Polish and Jewish historiography, at least until recently, had largely been consistent

3] Agnieszka Hulewicz Feillowa: *Rodem z Kościanek*, Kraków 1988, Wydawnictwo Literackie; quoted in Feliks Tych: *Długi cień Zagłady*, Warszawa 1999, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny.

with this selectivity, by not paying much attention to the suffering of the other group. This was due not only to the nature of the documentary record itself, but also to the fact that both groups engage in a kind of competition of suffering, and often tend to perceive it as a zero-sum game in which the amount of recognition granted to the suffering of the "other side" supposedly detracts from that which is granted to their own pain. There is some truth to such fears: certain Polish authors do try to promote the awareness of the immensity of the disaster which befell their country in WWII (6 million dead, of which half were non-Jewish Poles) by subtly undermining the importance of Jewish suffering. Public opinion polls have shown that Polish public opinion, possibly on the grounds of the above figures of the casualties, which do not take into account the scope and impact of the separate persecutions Poles and Jews suffered, tends to believe that both groups suffered equally in WWII. Sensing this trend, some Jewish authors see in the recognition of Polish suffering a tacit encouragement to this kind of historical revisionism. Jewish public opinion in Israel – at least as represented through statements often made by Israeli visitors to Shoah sites in Poland – seems barely aware of the fact that Poles, too, were victims. If anything, they are seen as accomplices of the perpetrators.

This belief, though offensive to many Poles, is well substantiated in the historical record, even if the extent of participation by Poles (though not by Polish state institutions: there was no Polish Quisling) in the German extermination of the Jews cannot be assessed with any historical accuracy. Eyewitness reports by both Jews and also many Poles, however, clearly show that all Jews in hiding on the "Aryan side" were at all times in danger of denunciation to the Germans by Poles, and subject to the no less constant threat of blackmail. This is in no way contradicted by the fact that Polish saviors of Jews were the single biggest national group among the Righteous Among the Nations, awarded by Yad Vashem: we are speaking about two different minorities among the Polish population, though the denunciators were in all certainty more numerous. The historical consensus seems to be that the overwhelming majority of the Poles were themselves simply busy surviving: they did not give assistance to Jews in need of it, but neither did they go out of their way to hinder their efforts to survive.

This, however, sits very uneasily with Polish self-perceptions. And even more important from the Polish perspective than these are the perceptions of third parties. For both Jews and Poles, their suffering in WWII is a central element in their self-narrative – and in the way they

want to be seen by the world. Both nations tend to believe that their suffering – in each case truly atrocious, even if hardly equal – qualifies them for special attention from the post-war international community. They both want to enjoy the moral high ground which seems to come with the status of victim – and to use this status to demand compensation, at least moral, and protection, at least political. The world, having betrayed them and having allowed them to suffer and die, now owes them at least the reassurance that it will not allow the suffering to be repeated – ever again.

Yet, as the American writer David Rieff wrote after having witnessed first-hand the horrors of Sarajevo under siege, we have to realize that "never again" only means that "Never again will Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s." The guarantee of security that this solemn plea seemed to imply in the immediate post-war era is gone. And if so, the victims of the Germans now find themselves in the unenviable position of competing against each other for the scant attention of the World, and past suffering is a weak currency against current suffering. Hence the importance of at least securing the recognition of one's own status as bona fide victim, whatever the meager moral and political benefits that come with it, 70 years after WWII.

But just as they are unequal in suffering, Poles and Jews are even more unequal in their perceptions of suffering. The mayor of Nagasaki reportedly said that: "There is only one thing worse than being the first city to be A-bombed: it is being the second one." Indeed, Hiroshima is recognized as the international symbol of the new, post-Shoah atomic nightmare; Nagasaki is a historian's afterthought. And in their attempt to gain for their narrative a status similar to that of the universal recognition of Jewish suffering, the Poles are locked in the same trap.

One obvious way of reducing the difference in the status of the two is to undermine the validity of the recognition granted to the other side: if Hiroshima is downplayed, Nagasaki's relative position improves. Even if Holocaust denial is an - irredeemably obscene - growing threat world-wide, its presence in the Polish discourse is very limited. The empirical evidence of the horror unleashed by the German war machine is still hugely visible all over the country, and Holocaust denial would, fatally entail, also the denial of the most traumatic event in Polish history. This venue, mercifully, is all but closed for Polish participation.

What remains, then, is the painstaking, ever-vigilant defense of the historical record, the way it is seen and remembered in Poland. With

historical research from Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* onwards revealing more and more details about the scale and atrocity of the participation of a segment of the population of occupied Poland in the German extermination of the Jews, it is becoming increasingly difficult to deny not only that the Jews suffered more, but also that Poles bear part of the responsibility for that suffering. This being the case, it is even more important to preserve the memory of the fact that, even though many more Poles than the nation's historical memory cares to remember were perpetrators, they all were also potential victims, and three million did die, at the hands of both the German and Soviet occupiers. Furthermore, as stressed earlier, Polish participation in the German murder of the Jews, was at the individual level, not the national or state level, unlike in all the other nations of occupied Europe. Hence the importance of the bitter polemic over the term "Polish death camps".

The term appears not infrequently in journalistic reports on the German death machine, and usually means nothing more than a geographical reference, shorthand for the cumbersome "German death camps established on occupied Polish territory". Yet on the face of it, it can also be read to mean death camps "set up by Poles", or "run by Poles", or even "run by Poland". With knowledge of the history of WWII growing dimmer with every passing decade, such a reading could well emerge, to the obvious detriment of both the historical record and the Polish national interest. It is hardly surprising that Polish public opinion reacts violently to such a threat, and that Polish diplomatic missions abroad have standing instructions to protest vociferously every time the expression appears in the media.

Given that the historical record is absolutely clear: there was no Polish participation in the German death camp enterprise, and the camps themselves were set up on occupied Polish territory because that is where the plurality of the Jews to be murdered lived, and given the enormity of the unintended slur, correcting that usage should have been a simple thing. Yet that was hardly the case: it is only recently that major media organizations, such as the NYT, the WSJ and AP have modified their style-books to preclude the use of the incriminated expression, and it keeps reappearing, even though more infrequently than a decade or two ago. Many in Poland genuinely suspect that the reason for its obstinate reappearance is sinister: it is an attempt to create the image that the Poles, alongside the Germans (in the extreme formulation: rather than the Germans), were the perpetrators of the

Shoah. Conspiracy theories abound that the driving force behind the alleged campaign is the Germans (to be able to deny their historical guilt) or the Jews (motivated by an alleged hatred of Poland). The idea that the injurious expression is used because it is shorter, and that in most cases writers using it have no appreciation of the importance it takes on in Polish eyes is extremely difficult to convey to even an open-minded Polish public.

Matters came to a head when in May 2012 US President Barack Obama used the unfortunate expression in his presentation of a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jan Karski, a Polish WWII hero, who had, among his many exploits as a member of the resistance, clandestinely entered a German camp in occupied Poland and then was smuggled out to brief Allied leaders personally; his testimony was widely disbelieved and marginalized. The enormity of the gaffe was not immediately obvious to the President and his staff, but after furious reactions from Poland (Obama "offended all Poles", PM Donald Tusk said), but also from American Jewish organizations such as the AJC, he had no doubts. "I regret the error," he confessed in a letter sent to his Polish counterpart, Bronisław Komorowski. "There simply were no 'Polish death camps'." This should have set the record straight – yet the entire issue was barely noted in the media outside of Poland. The issue will in all probability continue to linger.

And even if the issue of unfair accusations were to be solved, there remains the more complex case of accusations seen mainly by Poles as unfair, though Jewish survivors seem to remember things differently. "The 'illegal' Jews [i.e. those in hiding on the 'Aryan side'] feared the local population much more than the Germans" wrote survivor Ryszard Kujalnik in a letter in *Gazeta Lubelska*, a newspaper published in liberated Polish territory, as early as in November 1944.[4] In 90% of cases, he estimated, arrests of Jews who were in hiding came about as a result of denunciation. Most survivors would tend to agree with his assessment, and so does much of post-war non-Polish historiography – but also, increasingly, contemporary Polish historiography as well.[5] Assessments of the nefarious role played by the Polish population might, if anything, be revised in an even more critical direction. "All that we know about this subject [i.e. the fate of Polish Jews under

4] As quoted in Feliks Tych, op. cit.

5] Cf. e.g. Jan Grabowski: *„Ja tego Żyda znam!" Szantażowanie Żydów w Warszawie 1939–1943*. Warszawa 2004, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN.

German occupation] – *through the very fact that it has been told* – is not a representative sample of the Jewish fate. These are all stories [seen] through rose-tinted glasses, with happy endings, by those who survived. […] We know nothing about rock bottom, about the ultimate betrayal which they fell prey to, about the Calvary of ninety per cent of pre-war Polish Jewry. This is why we should take at face value the shreds of information which are at our disposal, while being aware that the truth about the destruction of the Jewish community may only be [even] more tragic than our representation of it based on the accounts of those who survived", writes Jan Gross in the conclusion of his ground-breaking book *Neighbors*.[6] This methodological requirement is to an extent well-founded and necessary. Yet it also opens the possibility of new interpretations which go in a different direction.

The vision of Polish society as uniformly hostile to Jews trying to survive, with the exception of the rare few who risked their lives to save them, as expressed in Kujalnik's letter (in which he also gives due recognition to those few heroes) is consistent, as noted, with the memories of survivors. Using Gross's methodological requirement, we would have to say that the reality was, if anything, even worse. Yet it also has to be noted that this vision is not necessarily consistent with the social reality of the time, but only with how it was remembered by people who were not – to say the least – dispassionate observers of the events it concerned. The view that, with the exception of a few heroes, everybody else was the enemy, had a high survival value. People who might otherwise have tended towards a more positive vision of Polish society would have been inclined to trust others, and therefore run a higher risk of placing their trust in people they should not have trusted and thus of being denounced and subsequently murdered – and their stories, and the image of Polish society which would have come with them, have not been told. At first glance, this might seem a spurious argument – for does not the fate of such hypothetically more trusting people prove that the harsher view was amply justified? Not necessarily. It only proves that there were more unscrupulous individuals than the trusting people had believed – but not that it was right, from an analytical point of view, to believe that most people were unscrupulous, even if that belief was useful from the point of view of survival.

6] Jan Tomasz Gross: *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*. Sejny 2000, Pogranicze.

This is not caviling. Gross is right that we need to take survivors' testimony at face value – unless there are reasons to treat it otherwise. Yet Rotem, for instance, was clearly wrong in his belief that the "Aryan side" of Warsaw was part of the "normal world". This in no way invalidates his testimony. It just shows that it needs to be taken in context – not only from a historical, but also from a psychological point of view: from his perspective, that of an inmate of the ghetto, Warsaw on the other side of the wall could not fail to be seen as "normal". The case of Hulewicz is more complicated. Her testimony, too – or rather the lack of it – also needs to be treated at face value, even if in all probability Gross intended his stipulation to be applied to the testimony of Jewish survivors, and not Poles. It is unthinkable to assume that she was not aware of the ghetto, the more so as she had by accident ventured into it – and even in 1941, two years before Rotem's escape through the sewers, the situation there was somewhat less dire than in 1943. Still, the fate of the Jews imprisoned in horrible conditions and subject to unbridled violence was markedly and visibly worse than that of the residents of the "Aryan side" of the city. Yet this seems to have made no impression on her, to the extent that she did not feel the need to dwell further on the subject, even in a book published almost half a century later, when knowledge about what happened behind the wall was common. Barring the implausible assumption of the author's moral insanity, we need to conclude that her reason for not referring in any greater detail to the ghetto was because it lay outside her mental universe: whatever was happening there was happening to "them" and not to "us". In other words, intended as an expression of a cognitive rather than a moral approach, it was not her concern.

The eminent contemporary Polish Jewish historian Feliks Tych, in his magnificent essay on the representation of the Shoah in Polish wartime memoirs,[7] makes exactly this point. Having sampled more than 400 works, both published and unpublished, he concludes that "the authors of most of the analyzed texts either failed to take any notice of the phenomenon of the Shoah, or failed to recognize its exceptional character in terms of civilization". The reasons for that were variegated: from lack of identification with the murdered Jews, perceived as alien, through covert – or overt – satisfaction that "Poland's enemies" were being eliminated in a way which was, to be sure, criminal, and supposedly would have never been used by the Poles themselves, but

7] Feliks Tych, op. cit.

which nonetheless did produce a desirable outcome: a Poland free of the Jews. In some cases, when the memoirists were urban dwellers, the events themselves escaped their attention, for they took place behind walls, where outsiders need not look unless they badly wanted to. In rural Poland and in small towns the murders took place in the open and could not be concealed – but in these regions there were fewer witnesses with the proclivity for putting what they saw in writing. The foundations for the Polish memory of the Shoah were laid in the cities, where it was easier not to see. In a nutshell: the event was too huge to be recognized and noted. It escaped perception, as it were, and therefore did not gain the place it should have occupied in post-war Polish memory.

This is not to suggest that there had been no moral reaction, simply that there had not been enough of one. Jewish suffering was not adequately recognized by these authors – and subsequently by Polish memory – because it had been too huge. Polish suffering – as exemplified in Rotem's statements – had not been recognized by Jewish memory because it had not been huge enough. Two opposite cognitive strategies had produced similar results.

This cognitive parallelism obviously does not imply moral parallelism as well. It was the Jews who had depended on the Poles for help, not the other way round – and Polish reactions to the immensity of the Shoah, or rather the lack of them, had been a contributing factor in making that help largely unavailable. Though this moral failure was usually not explicitly noted in Polish writings about WWII, it remained a nagging moral issue that Poles were aware of, but did not know how to deal with. Hence the very defensive Polish reactions each time the issue was addressed, usually by outside critics. And hence also the Polish obsession with looking for analogous moral failures on the Jewish side.

It is true that the lack of recognition of Polish suffering common among Jewish public opinion even today brings it no moral credit. Yet it would be ludicrous to equate it with Polish non-recognition of the nature and immensity of the Shoah during the war, and the consequences it entailed. The indifference to Polish suffering among many Jews is certainly proof of a certain moral callousness – yet nobody lost their life as a result. It is also true – as many Polish historians are quick to point out – that the Jewish police in the ghettos played an abominable role in assisting the extermination of their compatriots, and that the moral implications of this criminal failure have yet to be fully internalized. Yet the fact that some Jews persecuted other Jews can

certainly not act as an excuse, less still a moral counterweight, for some Poles having persecuted Jews. The Jewish police were acting under horrendous constraints, and in concentration camp-like circumstances. The Polish denunciators and blackmailers acted according to their own free will, and under circumstances which were incomparably freer. Yet another accusation often made by Poles in response to Jewish condemnations of Polish inaction – or, worse still, action – towards Jews in occupied Poland deserves more serious consideration. This occupation, however, was not German but Soviet.

It is a fact of historical record that the Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland on September 17, 1939, was greeted with visible enthusiasm by certain Jewish groups all over the invaded territory. Hastily erected welcome gates and cheering groups of youngsters met Soviet tanks as they entered Polish towns. For the Polish neighbors of these young Jewish enthusiasts there was only one possible conclusion regarding that behavior: the Jews were committing treason. The Soviet Union, after all, was but the latest avatar of a perennially hostile Russia, which had attempted to invade Poland barely 19 years earlier, and had occupied most of the country for over a century before that. It was unthinkable to express joy at the invasion of those troops, which eventually took half of interwar Poland's territory, while their German allies took the other half. The belief in the "Jewish treason of 1939" was one of the sources of wartime Polish anti-Semitism, and continues to fuel such sentiments even today.

Historians – including Jan Gross, whose seminal works on the Soviet occupation greatly contributed to an elucidation of the issues involved, before he turned his attention to the fate of Jews under German occupation, and then in immediately post-war Communist Poland – have largely come to a consensus on the events of September 1939 in eastern Poland. They have shown that the Jewish enthusiasts represented a relatively small section of the larger Jewish community, and that their reasons for welcoming the invading Red Army were varied – from relief that this was not the Wehrmaht, and that some kind of state order was being re-established (pogroms were already breaking out as the Polish state crumbled), through genuine belief in the promises of Communism, as attested e.g. by the fact that the invaders' officer corps included many Jews, something almost unthinkable in the then Polish army, to real Schadenfreude at the downfall of a Polish state which had made it very clear, in the preceding years, that it desired to be rid of its Jewish citizens. All this, however, makes the shock

and outrage felt by those Jews' Polish neighbors no less legitimate and understandable. Jewish historiography has yet to internalize the conclusion that Poles might also have had some reasonable cause for considering the Jews hostile – with all the concomitant consequences.

The examples provided and analyzed above do not attempt to paint a full picture of issues within the memory of the Shoah on which Polish and Jewish perspectives sharply differ. The intention was rather to indicate that such issues do exist, and that the discrepancies need not be caused by ill will or attempts to deny responsibility alone, but rather that they are the almost unavoidable consequences of the different and incompatible historical circumstances in which the two groups found themselves during WWII. Such discrepancies should therefore be considered legitimate – yet their very existence is a major stumbling block in attempts at dialogue between the two nations.

When discrepancies surrounding the historical record arise, the obvious solution would seem to be to examine that record and identify who is right and who is wrong. Yet such an attempt cannot be expected to succeed when the record itself changes depending on who is telling the story, and when the interlocutors have not only an intellectual interest in the matter, but tend to invest it with fundamental importance for their collective identities. Such is the case with the divergent Polish and Jewish perceptions of events surrounding the Shoah. It is obvious that the matter is central to the Jewish identity. Yet it is also central to that of the Poles, for WWII is the defining historical event shaping the nation's self-perception and subsequent fate, and the Shoah is a central element of that event. Therefore, it is hardly plausible to expect that either party will give up on elements of their representations of it which are challenged by the other side, and which they consider to be historically accurate. Nor can outsiders, with no personal or collective investment of their own in the issue, hope to convince one side or the other to adopt their findings, whatever they might be. On the contrary – the influence of outside historians on the historical perceptions cherished by each group seems to be in direct proportion to their willingness to accept that group's basic historical tenets; witness e.g. the popularity of the works of British historian Norman Davis in Poland.

The only reasonable expectation, therefore, can be that both groups, without giving up on what they believe to be true and the other side is eager to question, will at least accept the basic premise that the other group's narrative, from that group's point of view, is just

as legitimate as "our" narrative is to "us". In other words, that we are facing together a situation in which reasonable people can honestly and truthfully believe things other just as reasonable people can just as honestly and truthfully believe to be false, or at least open to doubt. That this is a difference in perceptions grounded in experience, not a confrontation of truth and falsehood: Kurosawa's *Rashomon* rather than, say, Sandor Stern's *Web of Deceit*. Only under such circumstances can debate be conducted without the hostility it usually generates. And once, in the course of that debate, the other side's reasons become clearer, there can indeed be hope that a conjoint – if not necessarily shared – vision of this contested history might eventually emerge.