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## The “Archaeology” of Popular Culture: Common Sense and the Past

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This paper demonstrates the influence of common sense on the perception of facts from the past. In order to understand the mechanisms of reduction, instrumentalisation and banalisation of the Holocaust in popular culture, we need to understand the influence of common sense on the understanding and misunderstanding of the past, represented in this paper by the testimonies of the massacre of 1500 Jews in the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica.

The main premise of the paper is that common sense is the dominant form of knowledge and the description of reality, which is reproduced by the mechanisms at function in popular culture. This paper is an example of ‘archaeological’ work in this context.

**KEYWORDS:** common sense; memory; communication; popular culture; oblivion

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Popular culture texts are sources of knowledge about the world, about the past and about the present. We are now aware of the powerful influence of popular culture on perceptions of the past, including perceptions of the Holocaust. The dominant form of rationality in this context, one may assume, is colloquial thinking.

A reflection on the archaeology of popular culture is therefore offered here is precisely in order to trace the influence of colloquial thinking on the perception of events witnessed by dint of a specific example from the past. Even Holocaust scholars may forget that their reflection is on the real and the undeniable. Today's image of the past is heavily influenced by the media. The image of the witnesses to whose testimony reference is made is free from such influence, although a poignant similarity exists between the thinking of the witnesses to the extermination of the Jews in the Niesłusz-Rudzica forest and the ways of thinking that shape the memory of the Holocaust in popular culture. The witnesses to the events were, however, not as mentally, symbolically or emotionally caught up in popular culture in all its complexity as is the case today. What transpires to be common between the traumatised witnesses of the past and us, modern recipients of popular culture texts, is precisely colloquial thinking as the dominant cognitive form.

It is therefore worth examining the testimonies of the witnesses in order to ascertain the influence common sense had on their perception of the world at the time. Knowing this may bring us closer to understanding what is happening today with the Holocaust memory and discourse in popular culture. Common sense will be defined according to the concept of Clifford Geertz, but this term refers to the form of perception, description and dissemination of knowledge accessible to the average person, who has no critical perspective, no special cognitive abilities

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but who is able to negotiate the understanding of reality with the limits of his own language and with the individual and social needs; said, expected and hidden.

The concept of archaeology is introduced here in order to reconstruct an image of the past on the basis of certain fractures and fragments. The chorus of witnesses has now been replaced by media messages and the perception of the past changes with it, but common sense remains at its core, the same, albeit non-identical, cognitive framework. As an archaeologist, therefore, I uncover the common sense beneath the surface of stories and explore the way it influences messages about the past. In research on Holocaust thinking, no dissertation has yet been written that considers precisely common sense as a reason for the trivialization and instrumentalization, but also the constant revisiting of events whose unique ontology is undermined by the proliferation of popular culture texts.

The category of archaeology, in the context of this paper, is a metaphor for exploring one of many real deep undercurrents of popular culture. Typically, scholars write about the mechanisms and forms that shape and model popular culture, accessible through cultural texts or mass and digital media. This paper proposes a complementary perspective: let us begin to think of common sense as an introduction to the explanation of popular culture. The eyewitness accounts described in the article are governed by common sense, which represents the cognitive and experiential potential for understanding and misunderstanding reality; the past. In order to observe the way popular culture changes the limits of cognition about the facts of the Shoah, we should return to the testimonies of the people whose stories and memories were shaped by common sense. Crucially, since their perspective was certainly limited by their fear, their existential situation, by their memory, which had changed over the years, if the eyewitnesses to the facts knew only "this", which was "enough" for them, with no additional questions or doubts, it is uncertain how people today, whose perspective is mediated by popular culture, would be able to understand more, since their perception and sensitivity remain shaped by common sense. It is necessary to describe various examples of Holocaust images in popular culture. It is also necessary to seek reasons such images are created in the first place. Common

sense may be the limit and source of knowledge. The structure of this paper consists of three main parts: topography of the past, reproduction of the narrative and the *quasi*-qualities of common sense.

## 2. Topography of the past

Common sense influences the revelation of historical events and the way they are understood, classified, presented and described. An example of this kind of influence may be found in the testimonies of those who witnessed an event that was part of the murder of Jewish inhabitants of the Konin region of Poland. In September 1941 the SS unit known as Sonderkommando Lange executed 1500 people using gas vans. In the forest of Krążeł (near Kazimierz Biskupi) 3000 people were murdered by the same unit. In the years between 1968 and 1985, with frequent interruptions, the Regional Commission for the Investigation of Nazi War Crimes, on the basis of the testimonies of more than fifty witnesses, reconstructed the events that took place in the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica, near Konin. The form of the testimonies constitutes a specific style in which the person giving the testimony consciously assumes the role of witnessing, observing and, to a considerable extent, also commenting on the events.

By virtue of a resolution of 4 July 1975, the investigation into the murder of Jews in the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzic was extended to the murder of Jewish residents in the Kazimierski forests, mainly in the forest of Krążeł. It was stated that

there are no reasons to conduct separate investigations in the issues given above since they involve the same social group, the same region [*powiat*] and the same Gestapo organ, gendarmerie, and Nazi formation. The files for these investigations will be joined together [and will be conducted under the heading OKP.III.Ds-19/68].<sup>2</sup>

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2 On 18 March 1986 the public prosecutor J. Strzelczyk decided to link the two investigations, the first of which concerned the massacre in the forest

In the course of the investigation into the crimes in the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica the following facts were confirmed: most of those executed were of Jewish descent and from the Konin Powiat (district); there were about 4500 victims; the Jewish population was gathered in what is called "village ghettos"; the investigation determined the method of execution and the attempts to erase evidence of the crime; the date and place of the execution was also confirmed. The authorities, however, were unable to discover the identities of most of the victims, or the individuals or groups directly responsible for their deaths, which could have led to a criminal investigation and trial.<sup>3</sup> The files of the Niesłusz-Rudzica investigation comprise three separate volumes and several hundred pages of witness testimonies, photographs, correspondence from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s between members of the OK BZH (Okręgowa Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich [Regional Commission for the Prosecution of the Nazi Crimes]) with representatives of the MO (Milicja Obywatelska [Civic Militia]), regional officials and the courts, and the correspondence in 2009 and 2010 between the Polish prosecutor of the IPN (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej [Institute of National Remembrance]) and the German prosecutor in Dortmund.

The murders in the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica, however, are yet to have their own separate fundamental investigation. Further information has been gained through the exhumation of the bodies found in the forest of Krążel, part of the Kazimerski forests. Much is known about the death camp at Chełmno on the Ner. These three places are presented for two fundamental reasons: the murder of Jews in the forests of Niesłusz-Rudzica and Krążel was also conducted by the same military formation responsible for the later crimes in the death camp in Chełmno. These three locations are found in the region of the Warta River Country (a German term used to identify the Wielkopolska area and the areas near the Warta River), and the methods used in the execution of the victims were similar in all three places (Leszczyński, 1972).

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Niesłusz-Rudzica and second of which concerned the massacre in the forest of Krążel, near Kazimierz Biskupi. File number: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

3 Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

This paper will show the way the witnesses understood the process of the massacre of the Jews, its scale and the way it was carried out, based on their accounts and testimonies. It will also determine the basic source of knowledge among Poles on the subject of these murders. Another subject of consideration will be the way common sense influenced the testimonies of the witnesses to the mass murder of Jews in the Konin region.

Among the witnesses whose accounts were recorded was only one individual of Jewish descent: Stanisław Ka(ż)zimierski. Of the 57 witnesses, more than 40 had only primary school education<sup>4</sup> and had for most of their lives lived in the same place. No letters, souvenirs, mementos or objects belonging to the Jews have survived to this day. At least that is the conclusion we draw based on the accounts recorded and materials and evidence gathered.

If, like Clifford Geertz, we assume common sense to be a type of cultural system, it would mean that we treat it as a potential, "though not usually a very tightly integrated" (Geertz, 1983, 76) order which could be empirically studied and formulated with the aid of appropriate concepts.

Common sense organises the construction of facts in relation to past events. It is important, however, not to ascribe to these diverse testimonies a logical structure. The testimonies often contradict each other with regard to content. They vary with regard to narrative style and genre, are heavily saturated with the historical and political concepts prevalent at the time they were recorded and are affected by the passage of time between the event and the time the testimonies were recorded. Colloquial cognition of the past in this context means that understanding the facts is limited by provisional needs, prejudices and cognitive curbs. Common sense is a form of dominant rationality that conditions the cognition of eyewitnesses, but nowadays it also conditions the cognition of people for whom popular culture functions as the dominant source of knowledge and experience in their everyday lives. When we read books on the reduction of the Holocaust, we tend to focus

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4 A majority of the witnesses completed only the first three or four classes of primary school.

on the examples in mass media or film (Cole, 1999). This paper shows, from an archaeological perspective, the cognitive source of trivialization is shaped by common sense.

In the content of the accounts, the concept of common sense is something that may have gone unnoticed by those conducting the investigations. It is common sense that influences the way reality is seen and the way the past is remembered and imagined. "There is something (to change the image) of the purloined – letter effect in common sense; it lies so artlessly before our eyes it is almost impossible to see" (Geertz, 1983, 92).

The materials from the investigation into the Jewish executions were selected from the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica, as the analysis and interpretation of the testimonies would not be limited by any ongoing research into the event and there are no generally-held beliefs or assumptions regarding this event. Many elements in the historical dimension which led to the massacre of Jews in the Konin area also foretold the extermination of the Jewish population throughout Europe. I first heard about the forest Niesłusz-Rudzica as a small boy from my grandmother who saw "everything in that time (1941)". More than 25 years later I found the materials from the investigation in the archive. Here I intend to interpret only some of these materials.

The massacre conducted in the forests of Niesłusz-Rudzica and Kazimierski were the first examples of the systematic destruction of Jews carried out by the Germans in the so-called Reichsgau Wartheland, the occupied territory named after the Warta River (Dąbrowska, 1955, 124). Some witnesses report: "In the time of the German occupation, it was commonly known that the Germans conducted actions leading to the destruction of all Jews"; or "The Germans planned these crimes in great detail and meticulously carried it out." Paradoxically, the area in which one of the earliest planned exterminations of Jews was conducted is barely mentioned in research and seems to have been forgotten. The Germans succeeded in erasing traces of their crimes and it would be difficult to compile a list all the victims. This much is clear, but those responsible for these crimes have escaped punishment, and the local community has had to learn to live with a past they understood in such varied ways as to make it difficult to sum up. The witness testimonies

and memorials seem to be all that is left, but to unearth the facts one must scour the accounts by considering common sense, which influences uncovering of past events limited by the provisional needs, prejudices and cognitive curbs.

The system of analysis may be shaped by addressing the way common thinking functions in reconstructing events from the past. This analysis treats relevant portions of the accounts as texts characteristic of personal, particular poetics. They are infused with the contexts of time and ideology, modelled by clearly identified roles, dictated by the communicative conditions and the documentary forms that determine the structure of the testimony. The written accounts are fragments of dialogues in which we do not hear the questions asked but rather only read the answers. We fail to see the behavior of those giving their testimonies, or hear their voice, their mistakes or digressions. We are allowed only the prepared protocol, whose organization, linear order and coherence interfere with the naturalness of common sense. Regardless of the extent to which the written testimony reflects the oral accounts, every attempt at systematizing common sense leads to the loss of a part of its naturalness. Some witnesses, for example, said that, though they knew how to write, they had problems with writing ("completed grade three in a Russian school, but I know how to read and write, though I have problems with it"<sup>5</sup>). One may therefore conclude that there exists a real discrepancy between an oral report, which is practically impossible to recreate, and the written protocol of the testimony.

### 3. Reproduction of the narrative<sup>6</sup>

The testimonies show that the events described by the witnesses were often the subjects of popular narratives. One must therefore take

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5 S. Kazimierski's testimony (born 3 July 1901) written on 17 June 1968. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. 1.

6 The testimonies and their interpretations have been discussed in my other article written in Polish, in which I focus on the historical aspect and the impact on collective memory of memory operating on the periphery of cultural centres.



into account the passage of time that separates the person reporting the event from the event itself (Filipkowski, 2010, 23), as well as the simplification of the narrative with each subsequent re-telling. In the testimonies certain common elements that seem to have come from somewhere else are discernible: images from stories told by other people, the evident influence of media in the narratives, the systematization of memory based on the collective thought regarding the events, or even the suggestions of those conducting the interview. The last may be observed in a certain turn of phrase which recurred in the testimonies from the 1980s. The phrase used to refer to the victims, "Polish citizens of Jewish descent", was absent from earlier testimonies from the 1960s.

The testimony of the witness is a form of narrative of remembering, and bearing mind that "narration is always remembering," (Welzer 2009, 41) Frederic Bartlett refers to "subsequent retelling of a specific story leads to its simplification" (Welzer, 2009, 40). It is unimportant if we are dealing with a serial reproduction, i.e. person A tells a story to person B, and B tells it to C, or if it is a repeated reproduction, i.e. the same person tells the same story many times. In the context of the construction and content of the testimonies there may also exist an indirect type of narrative. The witnesses could exchange stories, borrowing some of the images for their own. We would then be dealing with a serially repeated reproduction, i.e. the same person tells the same story to another person, and the second, borrowing some of the model and content, tells the story to a third person, and in the case of a testimony, re-tells the story to a representative of authority. In the context of testimonies examples of the three forms of narrative reproduction are found. The following, is an example of serial reproduction in which a witness says:

It just so happened that I also know a man who was able to escape from a mass grave. He told me that he was a child at that time and, even though

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I have retained the titles of that and the following section, although my comments in this article are of course extended and deepened in the context of popular culture studies. Compare with: Kaźmierczak, 2015, 139–169.

he was alive, he was thrown into the mass grave, and, once the troops and the gendarmes had left, he climbed out. A Polish family in Maliniec hid him. His name was Pudernicki.<sup>7</sup>

The person testifying is recalling the story told to him by a survivor, but he is mistaken with regards to the name of the survivor. A witness with that name swore in court that he was not Jewish, that he did not remember K. Szulc, and that he did not escape from a mass grave.<sup>8</sup> This mistake is a simplification, which shows that in common thinking, lack of knowledge is compensated for with data from previously-heard stories combined by provisional needs. The story of a person escaping from a mass grave appears in no other testimonies, though certain fragments of the story seem likely. This story, therefore, has its own happy ending, and the individual who survived became a source, through the testimony of the witness, of an irrefutable story that might be presented in the interview as fact.

Repeated reproduction appears in varying degrees in the content of almost all of the testimonies. On the basis of the protocols of the testimonies, one may conclude that the stories were recalled with no great difficulty, indicating that they have already been organized and rationalized to the point that the stories are accepted as testimony. Repeated reproduction serves different communicative and cognitive goals, among which the need to explain past events and to reveal the real dimensions of various dangers are included. In this way, witnesses seek to organize their experiences of the war:

I realized that if the Germans found Kazimierski in my home, then my whole family and I would be executed.<sup>9</sup>

An example of a serially repeated reproduction is the story of one of the witnesses who, together with a colleague, saw the way Jews were

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7 K. Szulc's testimony written 3 June 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

8 W. Put(d)ernicki's testimony written 4 November 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

9 J. Bocian's testimony written 15 August 1968. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. I.

transported by trucks to the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica over a span of several days. The witness, Bartkowski, claimed that he, his friend Szulc and his whole family saw with

their own eyes what happened (...). Szulc's house was located about 1 km. away from the place of execution. We were wondering how the Jews were killed, since we saw that they were brought there in one, big taurulin-covered truck which later returned from the forest empty, and we heard only about 5 or 6 shots.<sup>10</sup>

Since the witness and his friend were wondering, this means that they tried to form a narrative in which their knowledge and imagination co-constructed the sequence of events. The need to refer to Szulc and his whole family confirms the truthfulness and indisputability of his story. He repeats those details of the story which are identical to the events described.

In analyzing common sense and its influence on the arbitrary uncovering of facts from the past, we have to assume that it is not, in its nature, erroneous, but that it expresses a specific kind of mentality determined by provisional needs. If one witness claims that in the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica about 4000 Jews were killed<sup>11</sup>, then it means that, in his opinion, it could have happened. In claiming such a thing, he speaks about things on a metalevel: about the fact that something did happen there; that this thing that happened, happened in a particular way; that in the forest, people died; that the person to whom he is referring, will help corroborate the facts as a witness; that he wants to help unearth the truth even if this will be only his image of the truth;

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10 B. Bartkowski's (born in 1920 w Gosławicach) testimony written 19 February 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

11 B. Bartkowski's (born in 1920 in Gosławicach) testimony written 19 February 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II. Bartkowski's story was the source of mistakes made by Polish militia (the name of police during the communist period in Poland). The militia officer wrote a letter to the public persecutor in November 1967 about thousands of Poles who were killed in the forest in Niesłusz-Rudzica between 1940 and 1944. In his opinion they were transported from the counties of Kalisz, Turek, Koło, Słupca and Konin. Signature: IPN PO834/134.

that the number of victims, very rarely a precise number in testimonies, is merely symbolic of a larger, more immense massacre. In common sense a whole mass of people could be more than people could count or at least imagine. This is an example of cognitive curbs.

We also have to assume that in common sense thoughts are expressed literally and exactly. That, at least, would describe the attitude of the witnesses: they speak about that which in their opinion really happened. The person conducting the interview and the prosecutor forming the questions continue to have considerable influence on the form of the testimonies. The content of the testimony is put through repeated mediations: temporal, narrative, constructive, cognitive, social and psychological. Time mediation is the time that has passed between the witnesses' statement and the time when the event that they are recalling. Narrative mediation involves the content of the testimony's being an element of the repeatedly constructed narrative, leaving us uncertain which parts of the story the witnesses remember from their own experiences, and which are borrowed from others' stories encoded in their own memories (communicative and cultural model) (Assmann, 2009, 104–105). Constructive narration involves the content of the testimony's being a transcript of the dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. We are familiar only with the content of the replies and not the questions. Aside from that, the person conducting the investigation influences the organization of the verbal narrative, giving it his own cohesion, linearity, and, in certain cases, the appropriate ideological form. In this case that would mean it is acceptable to the communist authorities, i.e. told because of provisional needs. Cognitive mediation means that the narrative related by the witnesses is in their mind the same thing as they saw and what they know. Those testifying answer a concrete question and inhabit a specific role, but this does not mean that they are telling the whole truth. Their role moreover also determine the communicative strategy that they will adopt, so that what is left unsaid says more about the witnesses and their way of thinking than what they themselves claim. Social mediation, the way events are understood, is influenced by where people live, their social environment, education and access to the media. Psychological mediation, that witnesses lived through the war, and had to deal with many

painful experiences on their own, is reflected by the silences in his testimonies represented by blank spaces.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which common sense has seeped into the general official silence about the extermination of the Jews. One may assume that, on an unofficial level, the subject often appears in stories, as may be seen in the testimonies. It must be remembered, however, that the vast majority of witnesses knew that they were witnessing the extermination of Jews, many of whom were acquaintances or, in the case of the village ghettos, people who lived in the same house. This dimension of the experience undoubtedly influenced the content of their testimonies, their structure and the images they recalled. We may interpret the testimonies differently if we could also access the parts that were left unsaid. Neither did Geertz, on whose concepts these analyses and interpretations are based, consider common sense to be a form of collective forgetting when he described its properties. Common sense was shaped by the mechanisms of (un)intentional silence, forgetting and arbitrariness. Similar mechanisms may be observed today among people who participate in popular culture. The historical and cultural context is quite different, but the dominant rationality, common sense, operates in a similar way.

Feliks Tych (2009, 41) claimed that the war conditioned in a generation with war-time experiences of what was coined Polish martyrology imposed on three other so-called layers of formation:

the residues of pre-war anti-Semitism which intensified in the 1930s were considerable; the demoralizing effects of witnessing the liquidation of Jews by the occupiers; on a lesser scale, the involvement of some people in the Nazi project of genocide. Added to this the subconscious, unspoken moral discomfort at one's own apathy towards the extermination of their Jewish neighbors by the Germans. Some blame is also placed on certain social groups who gained material benefits from the Jewish ghettos and the German extermination of the Jewish population—the abandoned Jewish flats, workshops, shops.

To avoid ethics imposed by the above, it has to be stressed that in many testimonies, the witnesses were not able to fully comprehend the events

that they were seeing. The passage above mentions Polish apathy towards the German executions of Jews. In many cases it seems certain that the word *apathy* would be accurate, but in many others the use of such a label would be an oversimplification of a complicated situation. In many testimonies, witnesses repeatedly mentioned fear for their lives and the lives of their families. The occupiers made it clear, both officially and unofficially, that any help the local non-Jewish citizens provided to Jews, as well as any attempts to observe places of execution and camps, would result in severe punishment, even death. The fear that affected the relationship between Jews and Poles during the war in the Konin area was mentioned by many of the witnesses.

#### 4. *Quasi-qualities of common sense*

Common sense is “an everywhere-found cultural form” (Geertz 1983, 85). Common sense seems free of the imposed academic or political models of thought, or it has no direct contact with these models, or they do not shape the normative or authoritative descriptions of the world experienced. Common sense depends on certain well-worn assumptions which form and organize a variety of experiences. It is, on one level, meticulous, and on another level, general, and movement between the two is arbitrary. Thinking in commonplaces is thinking in stereotypes insofar as it conforms to schemata and pre-set patterns that both simplify and (re)structure our understanding of the past.

If common sense is as much an interpretation of the immediacies of experience, a gloss of them, as are myth, painting and epistemology, then it is, like them, historically constructed and, like them, subjected to historically defined standards of judgment (Geertz, 1983, 91).

Common sense seems to be a kind of wisdom that seldom gives up its assumptions. In its simplicity it seems to be as unquestionable as bivalent logic, without the need for confirmation of its veracity. Common sense does not lose its elasticity, and one of its enduring elements is its ability to leave unsaid those things that do not fit into the fundamental assumptions; it is the world that has to fit into our assumptions.

Common sense is mimetic: it imitates the discursive intersubjectivity of generally-accepted assumptions, with obviousness taking the place of objectivity; with heard narratives replacing one's own stories. In many testimonies, therefore, there is a repeated claim that the fate of the Jews was widely known:

In the following days, I heard from others and from my now deceased father-in-law that for several days the Germans had repeatedly brought and dumped bodies to this place and later covered them up. (...),<sup>12</sup>

[...] it was generally known that the Germans were carrying out plans to destroy all the Jews (...). Among local Polish people, it was generally said that Jews were murdered in these forests.<sup>13</sup>

It was generally said in Niesłusz and in Konin that Jews were brought to the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica and executed. (...).<sup>14</sup>

From the residents of Konin I also learned that after the Jews were brought to the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica.(...).<sup>15</sup>

All the residents of Maliniec and Marantów [towns near the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica – author] knew (...).<sup>16</sup>

The above show that the massacre of Jews was widely known and talked about, and it was understood that a plan was being systematically carried out. The passive voice in the statements ("it was said", "it was known", etc.) display a distance<sup>17</sup> from the events described, but at the same time, it signals that these claims were believed to be true. In

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12 M. Kordylewski's testimony written 28 December 1977.

13 J. Bocian's testimony written 15 August 1968.

14 H. Tomalka's testimony written 17 January 1983.

15 B. Bartkowski's testimony written 19 February 1985.

16 K. Szulc's testimony written 3 June 1985.

17 This distance was partially the result of typical bureaucratic and juridical language.

common knowledge, the passive voice is a model for the transfer of information or news. The individual narratives are thus shaped into the well-worn, accessible and easy-to-grasp standards of thought: cognitive curbs. Each generally-known or widely-known fact leads to other generally-known or widely-known facts, and the differences in content widened the stock supply of information, and the similarities in the narratives consolidated the image of the event. It was widely known that Jews were being killed; that they were being transported by trucks; that they were being gassed; that they were being executed, dumped and buried in mass graves. In other places, testimonies show that it was not known how the victims were killed. It was generally known that the victims were Jews; that people were not allowed to approach the places of execution. In all these instances of *generally* and *widely* there was no mention of the specific identity of any of the victims. Of course, most of the witnesses simply did not know the victims, but the generalizations appear even in accounts in which the witnesses knew the victims personally, for example in the village ghettos or as neighbors or acquaintances before the war.

The terms *generally* and *widely* signal common sense built on intellectual indifference. One knows only what it is necessary to know; one thinks what (one thinks) is thought by everyone else. Common knowledge is, in this sense, self-explanatory. The communicative function of memory based on common knowledge strives for “ambient elements of reality” (Welzer 2009, 57), which, from the point of view of witnesses, seem to fit their own memories:

This shows the associative character of memory (...). Just as individual memory uses associations to supplement its system of models, which it later treats as its own “memory”, in the collective level, the chains of associations are likewise built on the communicative path. As these associations are supplemented, a collective model of the past is formed, which now we call “history.”

Built on the basis of collective imagination, images of the past contain as much truth as is possible, useful or necessary to know and express. The terms *generally* and *widely* conceal their own form of hypothetical



morality. Since it was widely known about the Holocaust, it was impossible not to remember it. Opposition to the official discourse on memory is common knowledge, transferred orally, and therefore time-dependent, unreliable, arbitrary, changeable and replete with narrative inconsistencies in its reproduction.

Geertz (1983, 85) points to the properties of common knowledge that might describe a widely-seen cultural form: naturalness, thinness, practicalness, accessibleness, immethodicalness. Using these properties, albeit in certain cases their range of definition will be extended, the way common sense influences the construction of facts in relation to past events will be shown.

### **Naturalness**

Clifford Geertz (1983, 85) writes that common thinking presents everything, i.e. it presents certain subjects in the simplest form.

Common sense represents matters, i.e. some matters and not others, as being what they are in simple terms. An air of what might be termed of-courseness and it-figures are cast over things; again, some selected, underscored things. They are depicted as inherent in the situation; as intrinsic aspects of reality.

Common knowledge refers directly to reality, so it seems to obviate other knowledge. It is imbued with its own evident truth, the existence of which is incontrovertible; that only one point of view is necessary; that only then may it be perceived. Naturalness is not auto-referential, i.e. it needs no justification for its cognitive perception to be effective. In this context one may see that what is true in common knowledge becomes a source for ambivalent or critical comment for those that represent the official, inter-subjective knowledge of the world. One of the witnesses, in an attempt to fit into his role, describes the identities of the victims as follows:

Most of the people murdered and buried there were young men in the prime of their lives. Judging from the appearance of the corpses, one can clearly see that they were citizens of the Jewish nationality. This is seen in their Semitic appearance. I did not know or recognize any of the

victims, though I knew many Jews from these areas before the war. It was a monstrous sight. We were so terrified that Szulc and I ran away.<sup>18</sup>

One can clearly see that the victims lying in a mass grave were Jews. Before we begin to judge this perspective as anti-Semitic, let us consider the naturalness of common knowledge. The above witness spoke precisely, organizing certain material in an obvious way. The witness is surely unaware that in thus describing the victim he could be seen as anti-Semitic. He speaks of what he had seen and what he had seen he described on the basis of knowledge he possessed. A natural element of this knowledge is what Geertz (1983, 85) described as anthropological truth, which operates in an air of of-courseness. Anti-Semitism appeared in various forms in common knowledge, but not everything that is now considered anti-Semitic could be considered as such when it appeared as part of common knowledge. Many cases would seem to serve as a mirror of the way the matrix works in systematising experience in common thought. This was an example of natural knowledge resulting from a literal, commonsense treatment of reality. The witness adds that he knew many Jews, so we may assume that since he is talking about it, he wants to be credited for it. This means that his attitude towards the Jews was no worse than neutral. "One can clearly see" means that naturalness as a property of common thought requires no critical reflection, which may alert the speaker to the possibility that by speaking thus he might be seen as an anti-Semite or as accepting of the Nazi point of view. The inclusion of certain details, such as "the Semitic appearance of the victim", may be understood as a claim of credible observation worthy of merit, describing not only the identity of the victim but also the competence of the speaker. The problem was, is and will continue to be the same because stereotypes and intellectual indifference destroy or paralyze the will of new critical knowledge or alternative points of view. This means that common sense is contradictory.

Some evidence that Mr. Bartkowski as a witness tried his best to fulfill his communicative role in the wide range of his testimony, the details he

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18 B. Bartkowski's testimony written 19 February 1985.

presented, tantamount as they are to the telling of the truth in referential understanding and his figurative language: "Most of the victims were young men in the prime of their lives." He thus tried to imbue the event with the appropriate tone and drama; he wants to show his own sensitivity to the subject and the level of cruelty involved, though the wording he used features stylistic short-cuts rather than literal description because all the victims were buried in the mass grave regardless of age or gender. Comments such as these are rare in the testimonies. Most are anti-figurative. The literal content of the testimonies shows an anti-metaphorical language, one steeped in common thinking, in its transparency and literalness. The testimonies are ungarnished with metaphor and are void of sequencing figures, which, according to Hayden White (2009, 211), would have intensified the typical reliability in the description of reality.

### **Practicalness**

Geertz points out that practicality is another quasi-quality of common sense. "Practical" means "prudent," but also provisional (Geertz, 1983, 87):

To tell someone, "be sensible," is less to tell him to cling to the utilitarian than to tell him, as we say, to wise up: to be prudent, level-headed, keep his eye on the ball, not take any wooden nickels, stay away from slow horses and fast women, let the dead bury the dead.

The decades-old discussions on the scale of the possible rather than the factual help that Poles could have offered the Jews during the Holocaust speak more about the historical and political situation, the religious context, the socio-cultural situation (anti-Semitism) or the cognitive (prejudice, ignorance or stereotypes) and the psychological (the fear of punishment) background. There is a need to emphasize that common sense and common knowledge had a considerable influence over the prevalent situation at that time. In this epistemic frame it is worth looking at the issue anew.

Practicalness in the testimonies is implied in the very form of the accounts. The witness says that which he knows and that which he wants

to talk about or testify to. In the process of testifying the witness is confronted by authority, so his common sense tells him to be careful. This is one of the forms of practicalness. This quasi-quality is also apparent in the fact that the witnesses were uninterested in empirical facts that do not concern them or do not affect them. In this context, we need to consider that the witnesses talked about the way the Jews have not returned to Rzgów, Zagorów, or Grodziec, ghettos from which the Jews were transported to the forests of Kazimierz and Niesłusz-Rudzica. On the other hand, almost none of the witnesses questioned the reasons the Jews had not returned, as "it was widely known" that most of them were killed. There was thus no need to go deeper into that knowledge. Provisional need means in this context the will of oblivion and it signifies that there were facts that could neither be remembered nor understood.

Witnesses tended to repeat: among all the Jews transported from Rzgów and the surrounding areas, none returned and none gave any sign of life. If anyone had survived, he would have sent some news, because that is how it is with Poles, even before they were transported they agreed to get in touch.

A year after the Jews were transported, it was unclear what happened to them because between the occupation and the post-war period, none of the Jews I had known from Zagorów gave any sign of life.

Witnesses also tended to repeat: the Poles helped them as much as they could. They hid them, which is the reason so many Jews survived the war and the German occupation. After the war they all left Zagorów and it is unknown where they went. The Jews who had homes in Zagorów "sold them" and "left".<sup>19</sup> In this context we understand the use of the phrase "selling" is a form of repressive social contract, i.e. I will show you how I am going to think about it!

The widely circulated stories soothed consciences, neutralized doubts and perhaps facilitated the acquisition of Jewish property. They certainly made life no more difficult. What we would thus consider a naive explanation is a specific form of ambivalent practicality that

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19 K. Bartczak's testimony written 15 October 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

exists in common thinking. One of the witnesses, Mr Bartczak, claimed that Zagorów's surviving Jews sold their houses and left. This much is obvious, but only to the witness. The superficial coherence of the narrative, its linearity and causality (i.e. they sold and they left) are necessary to explain a world without Jews, although it is full of evidence of their existence (e.g. their houses). The cemeteries and synagogues were destroyed, but the houses remained, still fulfilling their basic functions. For many people, the explanation that they had left sufficed to explain the absence of their Jewish neighbors or the lack of any news about them. Common sense managed to be concretely practical.

Another example of common-place practicalness is what the witnesses say about the places of execution. Some of them went to these places at a specific time for a specific reason, and they went for something. In this context we may only guess at their motives: curiosity, greed, resistance to authority or the possibility of finding something which they might share (built on prejudice) and discuss with others. After the war, very few of them ever returned to these places:

After the war, I did not return to the place of execution. I only learned from the residents of Konin that the place was commemorated and that a monument had been built there in memory of the Jews who were murdered.<sup>20</sup>

Nothing more was expected; nothing was established more than necessary because knowledge about the subject had no effect on their immediate needs and did not fit in with their everyday lives. Their access to the past was careful and reasoned: they are prudent, they knew only as much as they needed so as not to transgress the lines, as doing so might place their world in danger. Knowledge about the Jews was unnecessary, so they only knew of them what was necessary. This could also explain the sense of apathy towards otherness. The model of common sense logic could be seen in this way: we do not know because we do not need

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<sup>20</sup> B. Bartkowski's testimony written 19 February 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

to know; and since we do not need to know, others do not need it either. So we will say no more than we need.

### **Thinness**

Geertz (1983: 89) proposes treating thinness as another quasi-quality of common sense:

“Simpleness,” or even “literalness,” might serve as well or better, for what is involved is the tendency for common-sense views on this matter or that to represent them as being precisely what they seem to be, neither more nor less. (...) The world is what the wide-awake, uncomplicated person takes it to be. Sobriety, not subtlety, facts of life lie scattered openly along its surface, not cunningly secreted in its depths.

We look at thinness here from a wider perspective than did Geertz, as we relate it here not only to common sense but also to the need to refer to a certain knowledge which depends on direct, visual observation. If witnesses see something with their own eyes, they accept it as an unquestionable fact. Common knowledge is based on visual observation, while common sense requires no additional enquiry.

Witnesses who have seen something directly may claim that their narrative is the indisputable version, faithfully modeled on reality. Transparency in this sense is the exact opposite of speculation. There are many examples of such an understanding of transparency in the testimonies. Many witnesses stressed that they were direct witnesses of the events of which they were speaking. Since they had seen it, the account must have been real. This is considered a different form of testimony from accounts comprised of second-hand narratives, stories they had heard from someone else. This direct observation is an aspect of the uncovering of the bare facts, nothing more, nothing less:

I remember one time I saw a hand coming out from under the tarpaulin of a car, and it seemed to be waving at me. (...) I saw for myself how, at the end of the war, a dark smoke rose out from the forests of Niesłusz-Rudzica and the wind blew an unpleasant smell from the

forests;<sup>21</sup> "In the autumn of 1941 I was witness to the following incident: one day I saw for myself tarpaulin-covered trucks coming from Konin to the forests"<sup>22</sup>; "We saw how Germans from the surrounding villages came and divided among themselves personal items taken from the Jews. We tried to find out the fates of the Jews, but we were not able to get any exact information about where they had been taken. It is undoubtable that they were murdered. It was not known where, how or when they were murdered."<sup>23</sup>

The phrases "I saw for myself", "I personally saw", "I witnessed", "we saw" serve to call the interviewer's attention to the factual nature of the narratives, and that they are not products of the interviewee's imagination. These phrases could be treated as the empirical equivalent of literalness. Geertz (1983: 90) claims that many accounts that contain elements of common thought and knowledge are based on content understood literally:

I began to realize that patentness, too, is in the eye of the beholder. That the world divides into facts may have its defects as a philosophical slogan or a scientific creed, but as the epitome of thinness, i.e. simpleness, literalness, that common sense stamps onto experience it is graphically exact.

### **Immethodicalness**

According to Geertz (1983), an alternative for this is non-consequence. It is based on the assumption that the variety of experience need not be described in a coherent, unequivocal way. The subjective perspective seems to be derived from common knowledge; parallel rather than perpendicular. Conflicting or excluding aspects may exist independently, so someone might interpret them as inconsistent or false, and they need not confront each other.

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21 W. Michalak's testimony written 17 January 1983. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

22 H. Tomalka's testimony written 17 January 1983. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

23 W. Nawrocki's testimony written 11.07.1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

As for “immethodicalness” (...) it caters at once to the pleasures of inconsistency which are so very real to any but the most scholastical of men (...), and also to the equal pleasures, felt by any but the most obsessional of men, of the intractable diversity of experience. Common-sense wisdom is shamelessly and unapologetically *ad hoc*. It comes (...) not in formal doctrines, axiomized theories, or architectonic dogmas (Geertz, 1983, 90).

This is potentially a risky theory, but because of the lack of consistency we understand the reason such frames of thinking as Józef Bocian's<sup>24</sup> exist. Although he knew that the penalty for helping Jews was death, he tried to save them. In this understanding, the lack of methodology would be an axiological quality. The witnesses therefore wondered why the Jews who were taken from their towns and villages gave no information about their whereabouts, although they had promised to do so. How could this be reconciled with the claim that it was widely known that all the Jews had been murdered? Perhaps this is the reason they felt no need to remember the names of the Jews to whom they were assigned. It is interesting to note that they were forced to live under one roof with strangers, usually a family, for about a year, and yet they could not remember these people's names. It would not be a mass of faceless people who crossed their threshold, but a limited number of recognizable individuals. The lack of methodology explains the reason, despite shared experiences and relationships, there is no memory of an individual person. Of course, the passage of time plays a role in the memory of these events, but in this context the war was a constant presence for Poles and Jews alike, which is the reason nothing was done to ensure that this presence would last and could be transferred to another time dimension. Immethodism facilitates memory on an objective level: a nameless person implicates forgetting as a natural mechanism of cognitive reduction.

One witness testified that a Jewish dentist named Arbuz once asked him for assistance in the transfer of his belongings to a location where Jewish property was being collected, all under the supervision of

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24 J. Bocian was a Polish farmer who sheltered S. Kazimierski. In 1941 Germans were looking for S. Kazimierski because of his Jewish background.



a German by the name of Dystercheft [the name appears in the protocol for the testimony – author], who was later to become the mayor of Zagórow. It is worth noting the part of the testimony in which the witness describes the way he carried out the task:

I moved the things in accordance with the orders to a place which had previously been occupied by Jews in the Town Square.<sup>25</sup>

The phrase is "in accordance with the orders" is crucial. It is apparent that they were not orders from Arbuz, but from Dystercheft. The witness helped both sides. The owner did not have to move his things himself, and the Germans got what they wanted, i.e. the property of the Jewish dentist. Immethodicalness as a quasi-quality of common sense appears in a testimony when one quotation is confronted with another:

I can state that after the German invasion of Poland, more exactly, when I was in Zagórow, the relations between the Poles and the Jews were favorable. Everyone tried to help each other.<sup>26</sup>

The above quotations show that common knowledge need not be a source of internal conflict or that, even if a conflict did arise, it would certainly be on a different level from what we assume from reading the testimonies. One may obey the orders of the Germans to facilitate their seizure of Jewish property and preparations for the extermination of the Jews, and at the same time help the Jews. Modern discourse would accuse some Poles of self-interest, or perhaps of selfish behavior. Each of these systems, however, had its own axiology, doubts grew and they became the source of conflict and evasion. It is now easier for people to judge such behavior as blatantly inconsistent, perhaps even hypocritical. We forget that morality in the context of common thought depends on the fact that for every everyday experience there is another, a parallel, alternative ethical justification.

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25 L.J. Widelski's testimony written 14 October 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

26 L.J. Widelski's testimony written 14 October 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

### Accessibleness

To Geertz (1983, 91) accessibleness is the last quasi-quality of common sense, resulting from the previous quasi-qualities. Geertz (1983) defines this quality as follows:

Accessibleness is simply the assumption, in fact the insistence, that any person with faculties reasonably intact can grasp common-sense conclusions, and indeed, once they are unequivocally enough stated, will not only grasp but embrace them. Of course, some people – usually the old, sometimes the afflicted, occasionally the merely orotund – tend to be regarded as rather wiser in an “I’ve been through the mill” sort of way than others, while children, frequently enough women, and, depending upon the society, various sorts of underclasses are regarded as less wise in a “they are emotional creatures” sort of way than others. But, for all that, there are really no acknowledged specialists in common sense. Everyone thinks he’s an expert. Being common, common sense is open to all, the general property of at least, as we would put it, all solid citizens.

That everyone is an expert in common sense may be seen in different types of witness accounts, in their details (many witnesses describe the trucks used to transport the Jews in great detail, as if to completely exhaust the topic), in their conclusions, their explanations of social and political interdependence, recognition of otherness, perceptions of causes and effects, descriptions of the victims, events, places, exterminations, geographical names (witnesses were able to say that some of the Jews believed that they would be transported to Bessarabia, though these individuals did not even know where the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica was, despite the fact that it was located a mere 30–40 km from where they lived)<sup>27</sup>. Education in this context is secondary to experience because knowledge comes from the everyday, from the ability to listen to others, particularly mature people. “Common sense, to put it another way, represents the world as a familiar world, one everyone can, and should,

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27 K. Bartczak’s testimony written 15 October 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

recognize, and within which everyone stands, or should, on his feet" (Geertz, 1983, 91).

The use of common sense necessitates a practical consciousness that allows for a rational explanation of everything, but within the laws and limits of accepted rationality:

In the autumn of 1941 I was a witness to the following incident: One day I personally saw how tarpaulin-covered trucks were going from Konin to the forest. In the cabins of the trucks I saw uniformed Germans. I saw that in the trucks were young people and women. After some time I also saw that trucks were returning from the forest to Konin. When the trucks returned from the forest and passed by near my home, I did not see anyone inside. I don't exactly remember how many trucks were going to the forest each day and for how many days. There were some days that there were at least ten trucks that went into the forest. I can't say exactly how many days the trucks were transporting people into the forest of Niesłusz. It was generally said that in Niesłusz and in Konin that Jews were taken to the forest of Niesłusz-Rudzica for execution.<sup>28</sup>

We were wondering how the Jews were killed, especially since they were transported in one big tarpaulin-covered truck which later returned empty from the forest, and we heard only about five to six shots.<sup>29</sup>

In both fragments there were several mentions of the lorries that drove into the forest full of people and returned empty (Hilberg, 2007, 315). The mystery had to be solved even within the framework of provisional needs and cognitive limitations. In both cases, knowledge was obtained from other sources. In the second fragment, the way of thinking and drawing conclusions is similar to the description that may be found in a specialist instruction manual. With the help of information from other sources, they were able to draw logical conclusions that satisfied their curiosity and filled in the gaps in common knowledge and avoiding

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28 H. Tomalka's testimony written 17 January 1983. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

29 B. Bartkowski's testimony written 19 February 1985. Signature: 13/10/Zn, t. II.

ambiguity. For this reason, the reproduction of different types of narrative is an important element in its constitution. Thanks to the expansion of common sense, the explanation of the mystery became the main element of discussion, the object of further investigation and imagination of the past.

The quasi-qualities evoked illustrate the mechanism by which people confront the reality that besieges them. Geertz's model requires further research and new references, but it is already apparent that naturalness, thinness, practicalness, accessibility and immethodicalness function as cognitive boundaries in popular culture too. Its participants use known and naturally assimilated knowledge, albeit possibly superficial, which is useful in many discussions and in maintaining the prevailing opinions, as may be seen in discussions about the Holocaust on Facebook. Common sense requires no coherent, critical thinking and is often based on the search for truths that are asserted with little cognitive effort. It is easily accessible, arbitrarily constructed knowledge and is therefore often reduced by the politics of history or the trivialization produced by popular culture industries<sup>30</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Common sense seems to be built on provisional needs, prejudices and cognitive curbs that block the emancipatory potential of knowledge. This means that everything we know is equal to everything that we should know. In place of amazement, curiosity and confrontation comes obviousness and the illusion of cognitive completeness. Common sense constructs the images of facts in the relations of events from the past.

Common sense present in the testimonies of the witnesses showed the content, range and plane of comprehension of the Holocaust. Many were aware of the extermination of Jews. The questions remain: how this awareness was formed and colonized by common sense. That it is

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<sup>30</sup> There are many books about the trivialization of the Holocaust. v. e.g., P. Novick, 1999, 392.

multifaceted means, of course, that the multiplicity of aspects is conditioned by the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, understanding and not understanding, one's own experiences and knowledge of others' experiences.

Geertz's (1983) theory based on five characteristics shows that the same characteristics are the cognitive limits of the past. This paper refers only to the well-known theory, and even at this level we see the consequences of common-sense understanding. Today, many recipients, viewers and users of popular culture learn about the past via images, texts and messages, as an ontological and cognitive prosthesis of reality. Although the need for cognition is positive, we continue to observe that the limits of cognition are shaped and fulfilled by common sense.

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