Conflicting memories: Polish and Jewish perceptions of the Shoah

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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 get in touch 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 impending 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] this sunny day of May 1st, stunned to find ourselves among normal people, in the street. We were coming from another planet. … On the Aryan side of Warsaw life continued in a quite natural and normal fashion. The coffee-shops worked normally, the restaurants, the buses and the trams, the cinemas were open. The ghetto was an isolated island in the middle of normal life.'[16]

Rotem's mission ended in failure, but his words open a valuable perspective on one of the reasons why Poles and Jews have such different perceptions of the events of the Second World War in Poland. Apart from the well-known and important, mainly conscious distortions motivated by self-interest, essentially on the Polish side (about which more below), there is the very important issue of differences of perception caused by the very different circumstances affecting 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 labour, and even this goal was not largely achieved. These differences in circumstances account for the differences in perspective: Not for the first time it turned out that sharing geography does not necessarily mean sharing a history. Polish and Jewish narratives of the Second World War differ significantly.

16 C. Lanzmann,1985, ***Shoah***, Paris, Fayard. All translations mine.

The Jewish underground fighters, emerging onto a sunlit Warsaw street, came from just several hundred metres away – but indeed, as Rotem himself says, he 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; yet the two and a half years preceding the uprising, ever since 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, subjected to constant violence at the hands of the occupying authorities, the inmates of the Warsaw ghetto experienced a fate much closer to that of concentration camp prisoners than of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the city, on the other side of the wall that divided them as of November 1940. In fact, it can be argued that the difference in the fates of Warsaw's Jewish and Polish inhabitants was greater than that which separated the latter's experience and, for example, that of the inhabitants of the French capital, where the occupation regime was much milder, or even of the residents of unoccupied parts of Europe. This statement holds true even before we 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, dead bodies did not lie 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 order to prevent underground activity, but mainly to capture slave labourers for work in Germany; some fifteen thousand people were captured that way in a series of roundups from 5 to 7 January 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 9 January a German poster announced that two hundred 'Polish activists' had been arrested and would be subject to 'severe measures' – meaning execution – if the attacks continued. In a mass execution on 12 February, seventy people were killed

in retaliation for a Polish underground shootout with the German police six days earlier, including all the arrested inhabitants of the building in which the shootout had taken place[17]. These were but the first actions taken in 1943, a year during which the brutality of the occupation regime would only escalate. So was Warsaw part of the 'normal world'? Hardly. And yet one should not be surprised that Rotem, with his experience of a nightmare incomparably greater than what the Polish residents of the capital were enduring, thought otherwise.

More puzzling is the seeming indifference of some Poles to the immensity of Jewish suffering. The merry-go-round that stood by the wall of the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943 was a case in point; it continued to provide entertainment to many Varsovians as the insurgents fought on the other side of the wall and the ghetto was engulfed in flames. Even more shocking, perhaps, is the sole reference to the ghetto in a book of wartime memoirs by Agnieszka Hulewicz Feillowa, daughter of a prominent musician and underground activist sentenced to death by the Germans. Describing the day of her marriage in 1941, she notes: 'We made a mistake en route to the church and entered the ghetto. The German police wanted to arrest us. It was very nerve-wracking and we were late for church.'[18] This is all – in a book of over two hundred pages. Though obviously it would be wrong to make generalizations on the basis of single quotes – both for Hulewicz and for Rotem – these do have illustrative value to represent segments of Polish and Jewish opinion. In both cases, the emphasis is on the suffering these groups had themselves gone through; there is much less interest, bordering on indifference, regarding the suffering of others.

We tend to find this shocking, because we would like to see the opposite be true, in accordance with the maxim that suffering ennobles. Yet, as William Somerset Maugham 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 as far as the eminent English author, it would seem fair to argue that suffering makes many people less, and not more, inclined to notice the suffering of others, let alone to take action to alleviate it. In other words suffering alters perception. The examples provided above 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 exemplification of a counter-intuitive human psychological trait. They are part of the basic foundations

17 W. Bartoszewski, 1974, ***1859 dni Warszawy***. Kraków,, Wydawnictwo Znak.

18 A. Hulewicz Feillowa, 1988, ***Rodem z Kościanek***., Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, quoted in F. Tych, 1999, ***Długi cień Zagłady***, Warszawa, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny.

of collective memory, which itself provides 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 eyewitnesses with mistrust, not only in cases where they might be suspected of intentionally distorting their depositions (such distortions are also easier to detect), but where the eyewitnesses themselves are not aware of any selectivity in their accounts. Yet both Polish and Jewish historiography, at least until recently, had largely been consistent with this selectivity, by not paying much attention to the suffering of the other group. This was not only due 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, with the amount of recognition granted to the suffering of the others supposedly detracting from that granted to our own pain. There is some truth to such fears: certain Polish authors do try to promote the awareness of the immensity of the disaster that befell their country in the Second World War (6 million dead, of which half were non-Jewish Poles) by subtly undermining the importance of Jewish suffering. Polish public opinion – possibly on the grounds of the above casualty figures, which do not take into account the scope and impact of the separate persecutions Poles and Jews suffered – tends to believe, as shown in public opinion polls, that both groups suffered equally in the Second World War. Sensing this trend, some Jewish authors see in the recognition of Polish suffering a tacit encouragement given to this kind of historical revisionism. Jewish public opinion in Israel – at least as represented through statements often made by 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 rooted in the historical record, even if the extent of participation by Poles (though not by Polish state institutions – there was never a Polish Quisling) in the German extermination of the Jews cannot be assessed with historical accuracy. Eyewitness reports, however, both by Jews and also by many Poles, clearly show that all Jews hiding on the 'Aryan side' were at all times in danger of denunciation by some Poles to the Germans, and subject to the no less permanent threat of blackmail. This is in no way invalidated by the fact that Polish saviours of Jews are the single biggest national group among the Righteous Among

Nations, awarded by Yad Vashem; we are talking about two different minorities among the Polish population, though certainly the numbers of the denunciators were larger. The historical consensus indicates the overwhelming majority of the Poles were 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 them.

This, however, sits very uneasily with Polish self-perceptions. Even more important, from the Polish perspective, are perceptions of third parties. For both Jews and Poles, their suffering in the Second World War 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 their suffering – in each case truly atrocious, even if not equal – qualifies them for special attention from the post-war international community. They both want to enjoy the moral high ground that seems to come with the status of victim – and to use this status to demand both 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 it will not allow the suffering to be repeated. Never again.

Yet, as the American writer David Rieff wrote after witnessing first-hand the horrors of Sarajevo under siege, we have to realize that 'never again' only means 'never again will Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s.' The guarantee of security this solemn plea seemed to imply in the immediate post-war era is gone. And if so, the victims of the Germans find themselves now in the unenviable position of competing against each other for the scarce 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 meagre moral and political benefits that come with it, seventy years after the Second World War.

But just as they are unequal in suffering, Poles and Jews are even more unequal in perceptions of suffering. A mayor of Nagasaki reportedly said '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 an historian's afterthought. And in their attempt to gain for their narrative a status akin to the universal recognition of Jewish suffering, the Poles are locked in the same trap.

One obvious way to reduce the status difference between them would be to undermine the validity of the recognition granted to the other side. If Hiroshima is downplayed, Nagasaki's relative position improves. But even if the irredeemably obscene threat of Holocaust denial is growing world-wide, its presence in 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 to Polish participation.

What remains, then, is the painstaking, ever-vigilant defence of the historical record, the way it is seen and remembered in Poland. Historical research, from Jan T. Gross's ***Neighbors*** onwards, is revealing even 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 thus becoming ever more difficult to deny not only that the Jews suffered more, but also, increasingly, that Poles have a part of responsibility for that suffering. This makes it even more important to recall that, even though many more Poles than the nation's historical memory cares to remember were perpetrators, they were also all potential victims, and three million did die, at the hands of both German and Soviet occupiers. Furthermore, as stressed earlier, Polish participation in the German murder of the Jews was on an individual, not on a national or state level – unlike in all other occupied nations of 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 set up 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 the Second World War getting dimmer with each passing decade, such a reading could well emerge, to the obvious detriment of both the historical record and of 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 forcefully each time the expression appears in the media.

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 simply because it was where most of the Jews to be murdered were living. Given that fact and given the immensity of the unintended slur, correcting the terminology should have been a simple thing. Yet only recently did major media organizations, such as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and Associated Press, modify their style-books to preclude the use of the incriminating expression. And still it keeps reappearing, though less frequently than a decade or two ago. Many in Poland genuinely suspect a sinister reason for its obstinate reappearance: it is

an attempt to create the image that the Poles were the perpetrators of the Shoah alongside the Germans (and in the extreme formulation, instead of the Germans). 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 in most cases writers using it have no appreciation of its importance 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 fatal expression in his presentation of a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jan Karski, a Polish Second World War hero (among his many exploits as a member of the resistance, he had clandestinely entered a German camp in occupied Poland and was then smuggled out to personally brief Allied leaders; his testimony was widely disbelieved and marginalized). The enormity of the gaffe was not immediately obvious to the President, but after furious reactions from Poland (Obama had 'offended all Poles', Prime Minister Donald Tusk said), and also from American Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Committee, he had no doubts. 'I regret the error' he stated 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 incident was barely noted in media outside of Poland. The issue will probably still linger.

Besides, there remains the more complex case of accusations mainly seen as unfair by Poles, but often supported by the testimony of Jewish survivors. 'The "illegal" Jews, i.e. those hiding on the "Aryan side", much more feared the local population than the Germans' wrote survivor Ryszard Kujalnik in a letter in ***Gazeta Lubelska***, a newspaper published in liberated Polish territory, as early as November 1944[19]. In ninety per cent of the cases, he assessed, 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 – and also, increasingly, contemporary Polish historiography[20]. 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 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-

19 As quoted in Feliks Tych, op. cit.

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

tinted glasses, with happy endings, by those who survived. ... We know nothing about rock bottom, about the ultimate betrayal which they had fallen 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 conclusions of his ground-breaking book, ***Neighbors***[21]. This methodological requirement is to an extent well-founded and necessary. Yet it also opens the possibility of new interpretations that 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 the rare heroes), is consistent, as noted, with the memories of survivors. Using Gross's methodological requirement, we would have to say that reality, if anything, was 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 concerned. The view that, with the exception of a few heroes, everybody else was the enemy had a high survival value. People tending to have a more positive vision of Polish society would have tended to trust other people more, and therefore to run a higher risk of placing their trust also in untrustworthy people. In consequence, they ran a higher risk of being denounced and subsequently murdered – and their stories, and the image of Polish society that would come with them, have not survived. At first glance, this might seem a spurious argument – for did not the fate of such hypothetical more trusting people prove that the harsher view was amply justified? Not necessarily. It only proves that there were more scoundrels than the trusting people believed – but not that it was right, from an analytical point of view, to believe that most people were scoundrels, even if that belief was useful from the point of view of survival.

This is not nit-picking. 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 put in context – from not only an historical, but also a psychological point of view; from his perspective, that of an inmate of the ghetto, Warsaw on the other side of the wall

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

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 Gross's requirement was in all probability to be applied to the testimony of Jewish survivors, and not Poles. It is unthinkable to assume she was not aware of the ghetto, all the more so because she had by accident ventured into it – and even though 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, walled in and subject to horrible conditions and unbridled violence, was markedly and visibly worse than that of the residents of the 'Aryan side' of the city. Yet is seems to have made no impression on her, to the extent that she did not feel the need to remark on the subject, even in a book published almost half a century later, when it was common knowledge what happened behind the wall. Barring the implausible assumption of the author's moral insanity, we need to conclude she did not refer to the ghetto because it lay outside her mental universe: whatever happened there was happening to 'them' and not to 'us'. In other words, and expressing cognitive rather than moral reproach, it was not her concern.

The eminent Polish Jewish historian Feliks Tych, in a magnificent essay on the representation of the Shoah in Polish wartime memoirs[22], makes exactly this point. Having sampled more than 400 works, both published and unpublished, he concludes that 'the authors of most of the analysed 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 varied, ranging from lack of identification with the murdered Jews perceived as alien, to covert – or overt – satisfaction that 'Poland's enemies' were being eliminated in a way which was, to be sure, criminal and supposedly never would have been used by the Poles themselves, but that nonetheless could produce a desirable outcome: a Poland free of the Jews. In some cases, when the memoirists are urban dwellers, the events themselves escape their attention because they take place behind the walls, where outsiders need not look, unless they badly want to. In rural Poland the murder took place in the open and could not be concealed – but in these regions there were fewer witnesses with a proclivity to putting what they saw in writing. The foundations of 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.

22 Feliks Tych, op. cit.

This is not to suggest there was no moral reaction, but simply that there was not enough of it. 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 – was not recognized by Jewish memory because it had not been huge enough. Two opposite cognitive strategies brought about similar results.

This cognitive parallelism obviously does not imply a moral one as well. It was the Jews who had depended on the Poles for help, not the other way round – and Polish reaction, or rather the lack of it, to the immensity of the Shoah had been a contributing factor to making that help largely unavailable. Though this moral failure was usually not explicitly noted in Polish writings about the Second World War, it remained a nagging moral issue Poles were aware of, but did not know how to deal with. Hence the highly 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 within the Jewish perspective.

It is true the lack of recognition of Polish suffering, common in Jewish public opinion even today, bears no moral credit. Yet it would be ludicrous to equate this with Polish non-recognition of the nature and immensity of the Shoah in wartime, 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 ghettoes had 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 were persecuting other Jews can certainly not serve as an excuse for some Poles to persecute Jews as well, or even provide a moral counterbalance. The Jewish police were acting under horrendous constraint, and in concentration camp-like circumstances. The Polish denunciators and blackmailers acted out of their own free will, and under circumstances that were incomparably freer. But 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. The occupation referred to, however, was not German but Soviet.

It is a fact of historical record that the Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland on 17 September 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 neighbours

of these young Jewish enthusiasts there was only one possible reaction to that behaviour: 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 nineteen years earlier, and had occupied most of the country for over a century before that. It was unthinkable to express joy at the coming 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 antisemitism, and it continues to fuel it even today.

Historians – including Jan Gross, whose seminal works on the Soviet occupation helped to elucidate these issues – 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 their reasons for welcoming the invading Red Army were variegated. They included relief that this was not the Wehrmacht, and some kind of state order was being re-established (pogroms were already breaking out as the Polish state crumbled); the genuine belief in the promises of Communism, as attested for example by the fact the invaders' officers corps included many Jews, something rather unthinkable in the Polish army at that time; and also a real Schadenfreude at the downfall of a Polish state that had made it very clear, in the previous years, it desired to be rid of its Jewish citizens. All this, however, makes the shock and outrage felt by Polish neighbours regarding those Jews 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 as hostile – with all the concomitant consequences.

The examples provided and analysed above do not pretend to paint a complete picture of the issues in the memory of the Shoah on which Polish and Jewish perspectives sharply differ. The intention is rather to indicate such issues do exist; but these discrepancies are not necessarily caused by ill will, or attempts to deny responsibility alone. Rather, they are almost unavoidable consequences of the different and incompatible historical circumstances in which the two groups found themselves during the Second World War. While such discrepancies should therefore be considered legitimate, 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 is 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 divergent Polish and Jewish perceptions of events surrounding the Shoah. It is obvious the matter is central to the Jews. Yet it is also central to the Poles, for the Second World War was the fundamental historical event shaping the nation's self-perception and subsequent fate, and the Shoah is the central element of that event. Therefore, it is hardly plausible to expect that the parties can give up on the elements of their own representations of history, which they consider to be historically accurate, despite challenges to the contrary. 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 over the historical perceptions cherished by either group seems to be in direct proportion to their willingness to accept that group's basic historical tenets; witness for example the popularity of the works of British historian Norman Davies in Poland.

The only reasonable expectation, therefore, is that both groups, without giving up on what they believe to be true and what the other side is eager to question, will at least accept a basic premise: 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, we are facing together a situation in which reasonable people can honestly and truthfully believe to be true, things that other equally reasonable people can just as honestly and truthfully believe to be false. We must recognize this disagreement as a difference in perceptions grounded in experience, not a confrontation of truth and falsehood. 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 contested history might eventually emerge.