

Jerusalem, November 28, 2019

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir
Institut of Slavic Studies
Polish Academy of Sciences

It is said that when Robert Caro, the famous American biographer, worked in the New York's "Newsday", his boss gave him this advice – apparently the most important advice a writer could get. He said: "Read every page. Don't make any assumptions. Read every bloody page".

When writing my book on the Kielce pogrom I really took this piece of advice to heart. And I read every bloody page. Every bloody page of the declassified files from the first investigation of 1946, and then from the second investigation conducted 50 years later. Every bloody page of the depositions of the militiamen, of the military men, of the caretakers, of the fishwives, of the experts in political propaganda and feeding lies to people. I have studied – again and again – the testimonies of the pogrom survivors, both those from 1946, and those from 1996, when the Polish prosecutors came to Israel to conduct these interviews again. I have checked every single name and surname. And I have lodged a query with the Polish Institute for National Remembrance for each and every one of them. Each and every bloody name.

The question I asked myself in the beginning was not about what caused the pogrom. If I had followed this path, I would have written just another book about the Kielce pogrom. Instead I asked myself how was the Kielce pogrom possible.

It has taken me a long long time to find an answer to this question. So long actually that I have not been able to meet the dates of any anniversaries. What I discovered however was absolutely shocking, simply out of this world. And I won't even try to offer you a summary. You will be able to see it for yourself when reading the English translation of the book. Thanks to the generous support of Yaacov Kotlicki, Manny Beker from the Kielce Landsmanshaft and rabbi Haim Beliak, who co-financed the translation, as well as thanks to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, who is the co-editor, the book will see the light of day in more or less a year.

"Cursed" – as is the title of the book – is first and foremost a tribute to the over forty victims of the pogrom.

But it is also a tribute to the survivors, who, despite all, found in themselves a will to live. People like Miriam Machtynger, who was the first to feel that that day was somehow different.

Or Raphael Blumenfeld who was one of the oldest in the kibbutz on the second floor and felt responsible for the rest.

Or like the recently deceased Baruch Dorfman, “a handsome lad” who lost an eye in the pogrom – a fact that changed his life entirely.

Or like Józef Fajngold, a violinist, still living in Manhattan, who had been beaten up so badly that his own father didn't recognize him.

Or like Niusia Borensztajn -Nester, my heroine, who died in December 2018 here, in Israel. She did not yield to the crowd yelling “You will die today” and she returned to those under siege in the kibbutz.

And finally like the youngest survivor, Renee Levkovitch who was still in her mother's womb on the 4th of July 1946, and who is present with us today having come all the way from Canada.

Thanks to this compulsion for verifying each and every name it was also possible to fish out from oblivion the names of the decent who tried to save Jews from the Kielce streets.

People like Zygmunt Majewski, a functionary of the communist Secret Police who saved the twelve year old Jakub Średni and helped his brother. He let them from the site of the pogrom at no. 7 Planty street and hid them in his own house. I hope that Jakub Średni's family is here today. I know that they have recently met the granddaughter of Zygmunt Majewski, Agnieszka, here, in Israel.

There have been many other such meetings, awakenings, which were possible only because they were built on truth. “Truth sprouts from the ground”, we read in Psalm 85. It is the truth, not politics, that must be a foundation of history.

One name that should be mentioned in this moment is that of Jan Tomasz Gross, and his book “The Neighbours” which woke up the entire generation.

My favorite writer, Alice Munro once wrote:

“The past does not vanish, it only loses meaning. But suddenly there is a rupture: what is past comes back and even requires engagement, some actions to be undertaken, despite the fact that nothing can be done”.

As much as I admire Munro, I think she is at fault here. We live in times when the past is coming back. And I believe that each and everyone of us can do something about it.