

Anti-Semitic beliefs in contemporary Poland

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Few academics have taken seriously the contents of the talk and tales that found popular anti-Semitism past and present in Poland. In an arresting book, anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir retraces the phenomenon back to its roots on the strength of a study of the “blood libels” revolving around Host profanations, child kidnapping and ritual murders. An exploration of the Polish Catholic subconscious.

Book reviewed: Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Legendy o krwi, antropologia przesądu* [Anthropology of Prejudice: Blood Libel Myths,], Warsaw, WAB, 2008, 796 p., 89 złotych.

It has been accepted practice to distinguish between modern anti-Semitism, associated to 19th and 20th Centuries nationalisms and traditional, Christian inspired anti-Judaism. The latter was supposed to hark back to ancient, archaic beliefs while the themes peddled by the former rather connoted resistance to modernity and “cosmopolitanism”. However anti-Semitic hatred has frequently combined both inspirations, be it in speech or action. In this respect, the Polish experience is quite shocking: until 1946 in Poland, Jews have been murdered by angry mobs accusing them of practicing the ritual murder of Christian children.

In recent years, the overlapping of these two mindsets has been the object of in-depth studies and debates in the country. Of course, nobody disputes the persistence of

anti-Semitic prejudices such as can be found pretty well everywhere in Europe, nor their dire consequences when manipulated by political, social or religious organisations; this was the case at several points in Polish history, especially in the 20th Century. The current debate is more concerned with the nature and origin of this anti-Semitism and the scope of both mindsets.

Social scientists are inclined to dissociate them when developing standard profiles on the basis of questionnaires. Thus Ireneusz Krzeminski, author of the authoritative and extensive surveys on Anti-Semitism conducted in Poland in 1992 and 2002, reports that religious prejudices play a secondary role¹. They exist in some sections of the population but are not at the root of the anti-Semitism observed. Historians delving into Poland's past, more prepared to weave together explanatory factors, have no hesitation in factoring in religious influence – the more so since the anti-Semitic parties themselves had brought it into play; they also stress the role of some elements in the clergy and the Catholic hierarchy. However, they do not see it as central. They predominantly seek to understand the social, psychological and economic motivations to a section of the population's regression into savagery. They are less concerned with the content of the discourse and folk tales wheeled out at the time of those killings² than with their cause – as could be seen during the recent internal debates around the 1944-46 anti-Semitic outrages³ in the country. In his latest and much debated book⁴, historian Jan T. Gross brings out the socio-economical factors linked to the appropriation of Jewish property by the Poles; he criticises the explanations based on the “Judeo-Communist” myth and lays the political and moral responsibility for post-war pogroms firmly at the feet of the Catholic hierarchy. With the exception of the ethno-nationalists who systematically absolve the Church and the Christian myths, many Polish historians followed suite, whilst blaming him for failing to take full account of pre-war anti-Semitic political ideologies. Not many deemed the

¹ See Ireneusz Krzeminski (dir.), *Antysemityzm w Polsce i na Ukrainie*, Warsaw, WSN, 2004.

² With the notable exception of Jerzy Tomaszewski and Jolanta Zyndul from Warsaw University

³ See a presentation of this debate in Jean-Yves Potel, *La Fin de l'innocence, la Pologne face à son passé juif* [The End of Innocence, Poland before its Jewish Past], Paris, Editions Autrement, 2009, p. 206-225, reviewed in *La Vie des Idées* [<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Quand-la-Pologne-redecouvre-ses.html>].

⁴ Jan T. Gross, *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz*, New-York, Random House, 2005.

content of the discourse and folk tales called upon by the pogrom-wagers worthy of any serious attention.

An anthropological approach

This field was invested by the habitual students of the collective imagination: literary critics and historian, anthropologists, artists even⁵. They questioned the structure of this discourse, the mechanisms presiding over the preservation and transmission of prejudices harking back for the most part to 13th Century Church teaching (later condemned by the Vatican). The book just brought out in Warsaw by anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir is in this respect groundbreaking. Through the close study of the discourse and stories turning the Jews into enemies, it tracks down the phantasized roots of the anti-Semitic phenomenon. The author studies still popular old folk tales that tell of Host profanations or the kidnapping by Jews of Christian children. Blood is at the core of those stories – Christian blood used by the Jews to make their matzo bread, Jewish blood that must be shed to atone for the profanation. In her study, Tokarska-Bakir discusses the theological roots of these “blood libel myths” that still thrive in the contemporary anti-Semitic mindset and brings into light its transmission mechanisms.

This interest is not foreign to Polish ethnology. One of the discipline’s founding fathers, Jan S. Bystron had published in the thirties a book on the Stranger’s representation in peasant culture, entitled *National Megalomania*, and which was to become a classic. Soon after the war, orientalist Tadeusz Zaderecki had, in a forgotten article⁶, conceived of a systematic study of these enduring “blood libel myths”. There had also been research by Stanislaw Vincenz⁷ who left Poland after the war, or Aleksander Hertz, exiled in Paris, who produced in 1961 a piece on the Jews in Polish culture⁸. And yet the subject remained neglected for some time. At the end of the seventies, it was to re-

⁵ Notably Maria Janion, *Do Europy – tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* [In Europe, Yes, but with our Dead!], Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2000. See also visual artist and essayist Elzbieta Janicka, *Mord rytualny z aryjskiego paragrafu* [Ritual Murder by Decision of the Aryan Court], published by *Kultura i społeczeństwo*, n° 2, 2008.

⁶ Quoted by Joanna Michlic, *The Past That Does not Want to Go Away: the Polish Historical Debate*, contribution the Jerusalem conference on Judeo-Polish relationships, 17-19 March 2009.

⁷ See Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste. Eseje i studia*. [*Clouded Objects. Essays and Studies*], Sejny, Pogranicze, 2004.

⁸ See *The Jews in Polish Culture*, Northwestern University Press, 1988.

surface in the wake of research on the place of Jews or gypsies in peasant folklore or on religiosity and biblical representations. The first in-depth study was carried out by Alina Cala, for her PhD in ethnology, published a few years later⁹. In the late seventies, she conducted interviews in several rural regions, which showed an ongoing “morbid fascination” for the difference and strangeness of Jewish culture.

Joanna Tokarska- Bakir’s research comes about in a changed scientific and social environment, at a time when the debate on Judeo-Polish relations has taken unprecedented proportions. She had incidentally come to public notice in the early 2000s when upbraiding Polish historians during the debate on the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom. Historians specialised in that period and region (in the East of Poland) had quite simply left out of their study the sources which established the fact that in July 1941, it was indeed their Polish neighbours who had burned alive the village’s 900 Jews. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir had exposed their “defence mechanisms” when it came to collective memorial matters, their “positivism”, the “illusory cognitive neutrality” exhibited by those “nursing assistants of national identity”, their fear of the emotion the contact with witnesses could have summoned in them¹⁰. She stigmatised this behaviour and the historic vision prevalent in a Poland who, “obsessed with innocence”¹¹, sees herself exclusively as a victim of the Second World War.

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, born in 1958, is a professor at the Institute in Applied Social Sciences of Warsaw University and has put her name to a commanding output dedicated to the anthropological approach to popular belief. She began with Tibetan Buddhism before revisiting the bountiful records of peasant folklore collected in the 19th Century, focusing over the last ten years on popular beliefs relating to anti-Semitism. She has lead several field studies, conducting with her students hundreds of interviews.

⁹ The thesis sustained in 1977, yielded a book accessible in English: *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture*, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 1995

¹⁰ History as a Fetish published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* en 2003, also in *Rzeczy mgliste, op. cit.*

¹¹ In: *The Neighbors Respond. The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland.* (Ed. Antony Polonsky and Joanna B.Michlic) Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 75 - 86
Original author: Joanna S.Tokarska-Bakir (English; transl. by Ewa Dzurak and Carla Lillvik) [Jedwabne case, Polish-Jewish-German memory].

Her latest book *Blood Libel Myths* is innovative, calling as it does on the tools of anthropology in order to understand “how a false Jewish violence can justify real violence against the Jews”. She is not concerned, she writes, “with political history but with the symbolic and fantasised history of ‘facts’ which, like ritual murder, never were but still influence our present”. She attaches great importance to popular words and language, wherein anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism have become entangled. Whilst she considers the former “a condition necessary but not sufficient” of the latter, she sees in the original anti-Judaism a construct of “difference” and in anti-Semitism “a relationship to the real body of the person declared Jewish, which implies persecution, exclusion or death” (P. 59-60). She draws here on the Freudian notion of “narcissism of the minor differences”, on René Girard’s analysis of the “Scapegoat” and first and foremost on the notion of “symbolic equation” as defined by Hanna Segal, who describes how under some circumstances, the symbol can become the equivalent of what is symbolised¹²

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir relies on a twin corpus. First, she has selected one hundred or so tales, stories and yarns, widespread in Medieval Europe and referring to the profanation of sacred symbols or the kidnapping by Jews of Christian children. Thus an interviewee in Krakow tells of a host profanation in Paris in 1290 “by a woman incited by a Jew who had promised her a treasure”; In Cambronne, in 1316, “a converted Jew lacerated with his dagger the painted portrayal of the Holy Mother of God”; others talk of the “Dekendorf Talmudists who, in the year 1434 pricked the Holy Host with pins” etc. She studies these accounts in a soundly scholarly first part, *Ancient Blood Libel Narratives*. She begins with their theological foundation as set in the 13th Century – drawing for this purpose on British medievalist Sara Lipton’s research: Whereas up until the fourth Lateran council the host was only a symbolic representation of the body of Christ, thereafter an equivalence emphasizing the Passion was introduced between the host and the actual body, this, the *Corpus Christi*, subsuming the Host as well as the Church with all its flock. By kidnapping children and profaning hosts, the Jews are striking at the *Corpus Christi* who in turn takes bloody revenge on the Jews (p.368 *et sq.*)

¹² See The work of Hanna Segal. *A Kleinian Approach to Clinical Practice*, 1981 New York/London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1981.

Tokarska-Bakir then sifts these stories through the grid of linguistic analysis: she relies on Vladimir Propp's thirty-one functions system¹³ to arrive at the constants in the narrative. She singles out four major strands that systematically follow each other and which she names the "nuisance" (the attack on or capture of and/or torture of a child), the "victory" (by the martyrdom symbolised by the victim's blood), the "punishment" (wrought upon the Jews) and the "wedding feast" (the destruction of the synagogue and erection of a church in its place). She goes on to retrace the genealogy of these legends from ancient representations of the passion which, long since forgotten by the Christians, hark back to a Jewish savagery, right up to the blood transfusions allegedly needed by post-war Jewish refugees in Kielce (there, for a whole day, Holocaust survivors sustained the attacks of a hysterical mob¹⁴). Finally, she concludes mapping out a pattern that repeats itself though ferrying diverse meanings.

A painting in a cathedral

In the book's second part, Contemporary Blood Libel narratives, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir confronts her conclusions with a field study. A public controversy stirred up by Stanislaw Musial, a Jesuit father well known for his efforts towards a dialogue between Jews and Christians, close to John Paul II for good measure, provided the perfect opportunity for her to study what perdured of these folk tales in rural mentalities. In the early 2000s, he had objected to a painting representing rabbis committing a "ritual murder" being preserved in a church. Freshly restored, it took pride of place to the right of the cathedral altar in Sandomierz, a small, pretty baroque town on the Vistula; the local bishop was opposed to its withdrawal. The controversy created a media storm and, in the end, the painting was concealed behind a curtain. Some observers accused Father Musial of reawakening old demons and of summoning up long-forgotten anti-Jewish prejudices.

It occurred to Joanna Tokarska-Bakir whom this accusation perplexed to undertake a broad field study in and around Sandomierz. In October 2005, she moved in with some forty students. They questioned 400 people, mostly aged 50 and above (but

¹³ See *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, University of Texas Press, 1968

¹⁴ The Kielce pogrom, perpetrated on 4 July 1946 in Southern Poland, resulted in forty-two dead and fifty odd injured.

they also spoke to a few young people). They collected a majority of anti-Jewish talk and could confirm in the process that the Jesuit father (dead in the meantime) had nothing to do with the perennity of those tales. A film directed by Polish artist videast Artur Zmijewski gives an original account of this survey, not least of the brutality of the shock experienced by the young students hearing that kind of talk for the first time.

The second part of the book thus offers an analysis of the painting (completed in the 17th Century by an Italian painter with French roots named Charles de Prévôt), of its history and the trials it is based on (all travesty). The author tells how this imaginary painting by and by became proof of the existence of such murders in later trials and in the rumor still abroad today. More specifically, she conducts a rigorous and systematic analysis of the 400 collected interviews, setting them against what she has learnt from the study of the old folktales forming the first part of the book. (Chap. 6). She notes immediately how many interviewees are convinced of the accusations of ritual murders perpetrated by the Jews: This is not a matter of belief: they know. It all looks as if, the authors tells us in substance, there was no need for proof, for they all know someone who can confirm their authenticity (an former incumbent priest, a bishop now dead, a grandmother, an elderly family friend, distant relatives, etc.). Some even call on supernatural collective memory; for instance this 20th Century Russian story whose narrator asserts that they met in the forest a ghost who saved them. In Sandomierz, several elderly people are still convinced that, as children, they were “miraculously” saved from Jewish ritual murder by Divine intervention. The legend needs not be true or even believed, it operates as self-evident household truth – a knowledge pervading language, superstitions, family lore, traditional games and folklore rituals – in short a social knowledge.

The students asked the interviewees whether the painting could be an influence: if it could spread a truth, through what it actually represented, whereby it was possible to assert that the Jews practiced ritual murder; whether the painting should be concealed or removed. Every time and in spite of the diversity in the answers, the ethnologists hit upon this intimate conviction that the legend told the truth. The ensuing conversation leading on to the war and post-war periods which most of the interviewees had experienced,

exposed the mutation of those legends into anti-Semitic stereotypes built along the same lines: they speak of the strange customs going back to the “times of the Jews”, such as the adoration of the “golden calf”; they remain ambivalent (voicing both empathy and disgust) towards Holocaust victims, or reticent on what became of the Jewish property they have seized. They are forever “keeping tabs on the Jews” who took part in successive Polish government (Chap. 7). One of the students’ accounts in the Zmijewski’s film illustrates the way this conviction gets passed on:

A woman invited us in for some coffee and cakes. She told us thousands of stories vying for horror. She told us of a day when her father and uncle had visited a Jew to settle a business transaction. They went into the house. The Jew left them and went upstairs to do something. The others were waiting downstairs, in the flat and they heard the noise of falling drops: plip! plop! The woman was talking with such emotion that it felt as if she had been there herself. Her uncle reportedly opened the door of the cupboard and found a Pole hanging with his throat slit! The woman gave us graphic details, with beneath him a bowl for the blood. This was for the confection of matzo bread, she told us. She told us this as if it were incontrovertible!

The probing and captivating analysis detailed in the 800 pages of this fine book dissects the thousand ways and paths of the perpetuation, reproduction, mutation and transmission of blood libels. Taking an infra-political stance, it brings into light what could one day make it possible “for the anti-Jewish myth, say after some catastrophe, to be taken literally, for some people to begin treating the Jews as if they were actually like in the myth” (p. 62).

By tracing the legends back to their Christian roots, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir challenges the Catholic unconscious. Her work does not contradict the historical or sociological approaches mentioned earlier – there is only a difference of emphasis –, even if it sometimes leans towards an essentialist approach to anti-Semitism. By placing religious conviction at the heart of her enquiry, she leads the analysis towards the point of intersection between Christianity and Polonity. This, as one might guess, is a raw nerve, hence the deep emotion these discussions are stirring in Poland.

Translated from french by **Françoise Pinteaux-Jones**

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