

INTERVIEW WITH WIESŁAWA SOTWIN, POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

The Ulma Family Museum Team: *Does the average consumer of the goods of culture in Poland draw from books, newspapers, films and theatrical productions the same kind of knowledge about the Poles, who gave shelter to Jews in the course of Poland's occupation by the German Nazis, as he or she learns about the Jews who were being sheltered?*

Wieslawa Sotwin (PhD): Let's start with scientific research in the field. Should we scan the greatest search engines of psychological research data (i.e. APA PsycArticles and APA PsycInfo) for "Holocaust trauma" we shall get close to 1500 (fifteen hundred) entries, and when we enter "Jews rescuers trauma" we shall get 0 (zero) entries. However, this does not mean that the psychology of the rescuers of Jews had not been subject to interest from psychologists. Indeed it was, although in a different context. The researchers investigated what characteristics made the rescuers different from the rest of the population, i.e. different from those who did not assist the Jews. Hitherto, psychological science has not analyzed the consequences of hiding Jews for their actual rescuers in the time of World War II.

Considering that we have such a situation in science, it results in a mirror image in the realm of culture. It is most likely that this influence works both ways.

When working on trauma with my university students, I requested them to resort to works of art that reflected Holocaust trauma and they would always analyze American-made movies. When I requested them to look into some Polish films they could not find any. This is because there are almost no

such films. So all the more reason to have no films whatsoever on a much more intricate phenomenon, i.e. on the trauma of individuals, who chose to help and hide the Jews in their own homes under the German nazi occupation of Poland.

Why didn't psychologists ever analyze the trauma of the families like the Ulmas, Bars, Szylars, Cwynars and Przybylaks who lived in Markowa? Most of them have survived the German nazi occupation.

Judith Herman, an eminent researcher in traumas, has stated that trauma as a topic of research is a heavily politicized issue. According to Herman, the traumas that were subjected to scientific research had been chosen for analysis as a result of action by pressure groups, who showed interest in these particular traumas. Firstly, pressure had come from the American Vietnam war veterans and, secondly, from feminist activists in the context of sexual violence. Without that pressure, we would not have had the acknowledgement of traumas suffered by the war veterans as well as women and children, who fell victim to sexual violence. So when we discuss the Polish Righteous saving the Jews, we have never had such acknowledgement of their trauma by the society at large. Only from a certain moment and in free Poland only, we had the acknowledgement of the courage and exceptionality of the Polish Righteous, but these considerations are altogether different.

Museum: *What are the psychological effects of long-term fear experienced by the sheltered Jews along with the Poles who provided shelter to the Jews?*

Dr Sotwin: What makes trauma different from common fear, even chronic fear, is the sense of being unable to get out of one's predicament. In standard conditions, fear helps to mobilize the human system to act through the fight or flight reaction. When found in a traumatizing situation a terrifying phenomenon takes place, but the human being is helpless when faced with this smothering force.

Museum: *Let's imagine we are in 1943, could the hope for Nazi Germany losing the war and the occupation of Poland coming to an end present any solace in that traumatizing experience?*

Dr Sotwin: Unlikely. As mentioned earlier, trauma takes place when action proves impossible, fight or flight is a no-go, while at the same time, the physiology of the human system spurs one to flee. Such a psychological setup leads to abnormal fixation of the system on a heightened state of agitation with heart pounding like a drum, blood pressure going up, shrinking stomach, reduced salivation leading to dry mouth, sweating hands and trembling muscles. Parallely, on a cognitive level, there occurs fixation on stimuli, which may signal oncoming threat, the field of attention narrows down, and disordered processes hamper the recognition and evaluation of one's situation. In a situation of trauma, this cognitive disorder is so deep that the affected individual cannot retell the event when it is over because the whole rational and verbal sphere ceases to function in the course of the trauma. A book by Bessel van der Kolk, an eminent American researcher in the field of trauma, was titled: *The Body Keeps the Score* precisely to highlight this physiological aspect of trauma. In his book van der Kolk describes state-of-the-art methods for the therapy of trauma, which focus on healing the body marred by the lasting effects of traumatizing horror.

Museum: *From a psychological perspective, was the trauma of the people who went in hiding during the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany largely similar to the trauma of the people who provided shelter?*

Dr Sotwin: When speaking about trauma we need to differentiate the traumatic event from the event's consequences, that is from the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

In the case of the traumatic event, the threat of death had been identical for the people who went into hiding and for those who provided shelter. However, when considering the helplessness endured in the face of the

threat, it is sometimes pointed out that the people who went into hiding had had no control over their situation, whereas the people who provided shelter had a certain degree of control. Then again, in my opinion, this degree of control was very limited as Germans could arrive at any time and kill the whole family, which was exactly what happened to the Ulmas. Bearing this in mind, we are allowed to perceive the traumatic event as similar in both cases.

It is hard to ascertain the post-traumatic symptoms. As mentioned earlier, PTSD research was conducted for hundreds of PTSD cases among the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, while no research was conducted on individuals who had provided shelter to Jews. In Poland, only recently the research on PTSD levels of WWII survivors has been conducted and included individuals who declared they had helped to shelter the Jews during the war. In real terms, those individuals were children in the days of the German Nazi occupation, which meant that, as a rule, they had limited awareness of what had been going on. Nevertheless, PTSD remains the case for 25% of the individuals in this group, despite the fact that close to 80 years have passed since the end of WWII.

Museum: *Could psychology displace this lack of research not conducted in the past through the analysis of memoirs or diaries of the people engaged in helping the Jews?*

Dr Sotwin: The brunt of the available historical records consists of dry facts only. This is not sufficient from the perspective of a psychologist. We would require materials of a different kind. Like the records, you can find in the book *Beyond Fear* by Barbara Stanisławczyk. It includes interviews with families who provided shelter to Jews. These interviews, conducted in the nineties, provide matter fit for psychological analysis. We would have to seek such materials with this need in mind. But even when we come across

such content, the snag is that it will not provide first-hand reports, which reduces the scientific value of such reports.

We have never had a good climate for conducting such research in Poland, perhaps with the exception of the early years after WWII. This is why today, 80 years after these events took place, the losses to scientific research seem irrevocable.

Wiesława Sotwin (PhD) is a Polish psychologist and university lecturer. Since 1996, Dr Sotwin has worked with SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland. Sotwin conducted scholarly research in political psychology and the sphere of “will”, and published a number of articles and two books: *Podmiotowość w sferze politycznej, czyli pragmatyzm-pryncypializm (Subjectivity in Political Sphere: Pragmatism and Principlism)* and *Jak działa wola, czyli dynamika umysłu (Workings of Will: Mind Dynamics)* .