

You should cry rather over yourselves

Bartosz Bartosik is talking with Bogdan Białek

Bartosz Bartosik

When did you decide, that you will begin to take a commemorating victims of Kielce pogrom?

Bogdan Białek

At first we should explain, what „Kielce pogrom” means. 4th of July 1946, only year after the II World War, militia, soldiers and ordinary citizens of Kielce murder the Jews, who survived the Holocaust and live in the Jewish committee in the Kielce downtown. These crowd hurts about 80 people in all Kielce. In the Jewish world Kielce Pogrom begins the symbol of Polish afterwar antisemitism. In Poland this is the theme forbidden by government – the murderers were the Polish citizens...

Back to your question... This is no matter of decision or special moment. I use some metaphors: you are walking and suddenly you're seeing, that on your way is water, at first as a little puddle, but then as a bigger and bigger ones. At first you don't pay attention on it, because this water doesn't disturb you. Then it is squelching a bit under your feet, but you are still walking. But then you have to swim. And you are swimming because you have no choice. If you stop swim, you will drown. For sure someone would change their way quickly, when they would meet too many puddles. I didn't change. Why? Let's say, that I wasn't smart enough to change my way in the right time.

Bartosik

But always is an impulse, which stimulates us to activity.

Białek

I don't know, that this impulse always appears. I can talk only about me. I think, that Jews were present in my life from the beginning of my conscious life. The more they were present, the more they were absent in my environment, in the worlds, in which I lived. But I don't want to brush you off and tell you a story. In 1998 or 1999 by accident I bought in second-hand bookstore a booklet *The Fiftieth Anniversary of Kielce Pogrom, 1996*, but maybe the title was different. It was published by City of Kielce. Inside I found only the pictures of the local and central authorities, photographed in the various configurations. When I reviewed this booklet, I suddenly understood, that today these people totally don't care about reason of their presence in Kielce in this time. They participated in ceremony, because it was their duty, arising due to their positions. These people didn't appear again

in this place. When I was reviewing this booklet, I felt a strong pain. Moment of memory, which this ceremony of 50 anniversary should be, appeared to me as an act of anti-memory, erasing the most important thing: suffering of victims and all of this, who were affected by this crime. This ceremony became the political fact, not moral act.

Bartosik

In the movie *Bogdan's Journey*, which testifies your efforts of commemorating the victims of pogrom, appears very clearly the religious topic. It is the movie about mutual listening the Jews and the Christians, about injustice, forgiveness and mercy. I understand, that when we are talking about the reasons of your commitment, we cannot skip faith and spirituality?

Bialek

At first christianity is not the individualistic religion. It is not religion to personal use. My faith forces me and adapts me to transgressing myself. For me the core of christianity manifests itself in the relation to the other person, to every person. In christianity I find the breaking of the understanding of neighbour as someone, who lives in the next tent, in the same tribe. Jesus teaches us, that my neighbour is every other. We all are Others. I want to tell, that for me the most important is my relation with other man, with the world, because this is also the manifestation of my relation with God. How I understand this, that we are created in the likeness and image of God? God always stay on the side of poor, of victim. And my duty is to be with victims. No matter, who they are. From the deep of Gospels I hear the calling to solidarity with everyone, no matter who he is. Because shouldn't be important for me, who is this suffering, rejected, lonely man. Pope Francis beautifully answered on question about gays: „Who I am to judge them?“. When he was visiting prison, thought: „Why they, not me?“. But we still want to make our solidarity conditional. We can see it in the case of refugees. We make conditions: we will accept them, if they are the christians, if somebody pay us, if they adopt to our culture... But christianity is radical: „All you need to say is simply »Yes« or »No«” (MattgheW 5:37). You see, this is my answer on your question about faith and spirituality...

Bartosik

Are you satisfied with this movie?

Bialek

It is unimportant matter. This film truly shows the course of events, doesn't make it in one-sided way, shows many perspectives. What more, you hear clearly the voices of victims.

For example we hear Miriam Guterman, who worked in the house at Planty Street 7/9. She was actually only one witness of this crime, from the beginning to the end. She saw all by her own eyes.

Bartosik

Her story is really moving. She survived thanks to polish janitor, who shielded her with his own body and bagged murderers for reflection...

Bialek

And in the same time she saw all, what was happend with her friends and colleagues...

This movie is unusuall also because it shows the ways out of this trap of guilty, shame, accusation... This movie itself goes out of the trap of dual thinking: „their guilty” versus „our innocence”. Did you notice, that very often persons, who concentrate on the measuring of guilty, say: „The Poles murdered in Jedwabne, in Kielce”, but they don’t say: „We did this”? They don’t say: „We, Poles, did this; we, from Podlasie villages, from Podkarpacie villages, from Kielce, Krakow, Warsaw, Rzeszow”. And these, who negate the responsibility of Poles, usually use phrase: „We, Poles, didn’t do this. Germans, Soviets, agents, communists, riff-raff, underclass did it”. The movie of Loewinger nad Jaskulski transgressed this kind of discourse.

Bartosik

This film doesn’t accuse anybody. Maybe, paradoxically, it is the main barrier for it to become known in media?

Bialek

It’s possible. Sometimes I think, that the process, which should lead to polish-jewish reconciliation, is interesting only for a few. For many Poles and Jews the term „reconciliation” is dispensable for some reasons. The discussion about polish-jewish history is still concentrated on guilty and innocence. And still it is put down in the political schemes. When I’m reading text about polish-jewish relations, about pogrom in Kielce or Jedwabne, it’s a big chance, that I will correctly point the author’s political sympathies. I often ask myself: who care in Poland about healing the wounds? The word „reconciliation” sounds suspected. For one group this word take out the weapons from hands, for other means weakness and humiliation. How it was possible, that short after the war were taken efforts aiming to polish-german reconciliation? How it was possible, that only 20 years after the war polish bishops brought themselves to the letter to german bishops, this great act of mercy,? How it is possible, that something like this, on equally

huge scale, equally important from historical perspective, still nothing happen in comparison with Jews? Why? If we could, only 20 years after the war, ask the german bishops for forgiveness, why don't we ask Jews for forgiveness? I still recall the act of expiation from 27th May 2001, when primate Józef (Joseph) Glemp, dressed in penitential robes, said: „As the shepherds of polish church, we want to stay in truth before God and people, (...) concerning with grief and remorse for crimes, which on July 1941 was happend in Jedwabne and another places. Their victims were Jews, and between perpetrators were Poles and catholics”. But a few weeks earlier he had said, that he will not go to Jedwabne, beacuse the point was not „hasty and noisy pennance”. The primate Glemp never went to Jedwabne.

Please, pay your attention for another thing. During the ceremony of 70 anniversary of Pogrom something non-obvious was happend. We opened the permanent exhibition about pogrom, in the house, which was the place of this crime. This fact was totally unnoticed even by these, who shortly after the anniversary put the strong accusations on minister of education, after her television interview, in which she indirectly negated the participation of Poles in the Pogrom. The agitation lasted long. But show me only the smallest interest in fact, that Kielce are only one city in Poland, only one city in Eastern Europe, which from many years talks in open and permanent way about its shamed history. Here, in Kielce, were the sincere acts of remorse and the deep acts of reconciliation.

Bartosik

Even local media wasn't interesting in?

Bialek

No, local media were interesting in. But our activity in Kielce is not only local. Coming down of Kielce activity only to local dimensions is a total misunderstanding what is happen in this city.

Bartosik

Does really nobody want to use this model, which was prepared by you and Jan Karski Society? We have so many places in our country, which have to face with their difficult history.

Bialek

The similar question I heard from the known French journalist during the ceremony of 70 anniversary of Pogrom: did someone from Jedwabne or other polish cities ask you, how did you do this, that Kielce could confront with their history? Nobody ask me about it. For

many environments, specially jewish, I am only provincial hobbyist, another filosemit, who maybe think, that he has a jewish roots, but doesn't have enough courage for „coming out”, hehehe... For the environments of true polish patriots I am „the antipolish slanderer”, „habitual Poles-preyer’, „this Białek, who was thrown from Białystok to Kielce”... For others I am a kind of ridiculous, a little bit incalculable hobbyist. A few years ago I wrote the letter to president Komorowski with proposition to legislate a special day of polish Righteous Among the Nations. He never answered. But it could be the possibility for education for peace, also for the paying attention on humanity. Against this idea protested my friend, one of the most distinguished people for the education about Holocaust. He told me: „Bogdan, you can't do this, because it will be used in schools to teaching, that only thing, that Poles were doing during the war, was to rescue the Jews”.

Bartosik

Can we talk, in the context of Kielce, about the phenomenon of the place, which can confront with its tragical history?

Białek

Yes, of course. But in many places in Poland Kielce are still the symbol of pogrom and antisemitism. Many people in Warsaw don't want to see the changes happend here, in our city, while they have swastiks on the walls of ghetto. Three years ago the opinion-forming weekly magazine „Polityka” published the interview with the known actor Krzysztof Kowalewski. For the first time he said, that he is the Jew and that he was in Kielce in the day of Pogrom. And the journalist said, that still noone want to talk about the Kielce Pogrom. It was in 2013, when in Kielce already stayed the monuments, were the marches of memory, Jan Karski Society was very active.

Bartosik

And in the meantime Kielce learned to talk about pogrom.

Białek

It's true. In Kielce was the premiere of Jan Gross book *The Fear*, in the mean part dedicated to Pogrom. In the later interviews Gross emphasized, that here, in Kielce, was the best discussion about his book. Of course, there vere crazy voices, but he saw, that the people known the theme and could talk about it.

Bartosik

But in the last year was the first countermarch in Kielce. There were only a few participants, but they cried: „Ubeks’ pogrom, not Kielce pogrom!”. In your opinion what was the source of idea of this countermanifestation?

Bialek

I really don’t know. But I’m surprised, that this countermarch appeared only the last year. Why not earlier? We live in the free country, which has 38 millions of citizens. According to Gauss curve always are people, who think in this way, and always are people, who think in the different way. Polish constitution assures for everyone the right to manifestation of his own political views, with only a few exceptions. And it is OK. Let they manifestate, if they want. But are these children, lost in the midst of ignorace, more important than fact, that in Kielce (and in the place of pogrom!) is the Institute for Culture of Encouter and Dialogue, who made the antisemitic workshops for two thousands of Kielce students and educated over one hundred teachers?

Bartosik

But maybe this countermarch is the element of bigger landscape of changes, increasing of xenophobic feelings, which we can see in Poland?

Bialek

You know situation very well. The waves of xenophobia was already increasing earlier, during the PO government. I don’t want to unfold the political perspective, but president Komorowski never arrived to Kielce for the anniversaries of Pogrom. Yes, he sent the letters for the pearticipants of ceremonies. He never went to Jedwabne too. Actually the both PO governments never cleary and strongly manifested, what did they think. None of the prime ministers of PO-PSL government went to Jedwabne. The one and only representative of polish authorities, who went to Jedwabne, was the „postcommunistic” president Aleksander Kwaśniewski. He went to Jedwabne even he wasn’t president. In the ceremony of 50. anniversary of Kielce Pogrom participated Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, the prime minister of SLD government.

Bartosik

But I’m going to conclusion, that - paradoxically - during the governments of PiS your idea benefited the biggest support, at least on the symbolic and verbal level. It seems totally nonobvious.

Bialek

Yes, on the symbolic level. The president Duda is the first incumbent president of Poland, who arrived to Kielce on ceremony. He entered to building at Planty 7/9, invited to see the exhibition about pogrom. He wanted be only a few minutes and stayed for over 30 minutes. From close distance I saw his psychic state. He couldn't exit. And the president Lech Kaczyński was the first, who sent to Kielce in 2006 his high-ranking official, minister Ewa Junczyk-Ziomecka. There are the facts – do you like it or not.

Bartosik

In the movie you mentioned, that you never wanted to prepare these ceremonies under any political aegis.

Bialek

Because I understood, that there wasn't my way. I remember the first bigger ceremony. It was 50. anniversary of Pogrom and the officials from central and local governments participated in them. On the one hand there were important events, there were the kind of turning point in the memory about this crime. But on the other hand I understood thanks to them, that some kind of ritualisation is actually the form of antimemory. Those ceremonies was made with a big pomp, but changed nothing. The true changes happen only when the will of acting comes from the local society.

Bartosik

Our disasters can be cured only by ourselves?

Bialek

One of the most important talks about antisemitism I ever had was the talk with rabbi James Ruddin, director of interreligious issues in the American Jewish Committee. He told me the shocking thing: „Bogdan, I don't care about your polish antisemitism. It's your problem”.

In this moment I deeply understood, that antisemitism is not the polish-jewish problem. It is the polish-polish problem. These things, which I make in Kielce, I make at first for the Poles. But from the other hand... From my personal experience I know what does it mean to be a victim. Once I was very deeply hurted. And I needed few years to understand, that I had to be the first, who hold out hand. I understood, that this injustice had hurted not only me, but also my wrongdoers. And this kind of wound will be last until we will make together a kind of effort to heal it. And I was this, who first hold out hand - the reason was not compassion for my wrongdoers, but compassion for myself. To be a victim hurted me...

Bartosik

So maybe this increasing of racist and xenophobic attitudes in Poland is the effect of the feeling of victimisation in our society? Maybe we are feeling ourselves as the victims of history, political situation and we don't know, how to break this bondage?

Bialek

Maybe, but I don't think, that this is only Polish problem. Look what is happening in the world. Look at the American fascination for Donald Trump - 10 years ago it would be impossible. We can see the radicalisation of religions in many parts of the world – and I don't talk only about Islam, but also about Buddhism, which followers take the weapon in Sri Lanka, as the Hindus in India. Maybe this has deeper roots...

In Poland we have to understand, how huge a hecatomb was for us in the II WW. Marcin Zaręba writes about it in *The Huge Terror*. He gives us the simple facts: in 1946 in Poland lived 22 million people. Only 50 thousand finished universities, and 300 thousand - high schools. The extermination of Polish elites began in the first days of war and lasted after the war. We can't forget about it, when we talk about postwar events in Poland. When I have the possibility to talk to American students about Poland, at the beginning I show them the famous picture of the broken figure of Christ with a cross in the midst of Krakow's Przemyskie Przedmieście ruins. It was the picture of the state of Polish postwar society.

Bartosik

Is the shame this kind of emotion, which can help Polish society to deal with the difficult parties of its history?

Bialek

No, shame is a destructive emotion. The emotions, like shame or guilt, are awful and you should avoid them, because they give us nothing good.

Bartosik

How to deal with them?

Bialek

You have to start from to call spade a spade. For example: if John Paul II was felt so strong shame and guilty, he never made so many acts of expiation. Of course, it doesn't mean, that he felt pride in these moments. He manifested remorse, which appears, when we see our soul exactly as it is. John Paul II started the examination of conscience, because he had seen the church exactly as it was. In its dignity and in its meanness. In this, and in that. You can't divide these two things. And this is why he could talk: „Yes, we

sinned, and we ask for forgiveness". He didn't tell these words on his knees, he was stright, with bowed head, but stright.

Bartosik

So the remorse is not the act of self-humiliation...

Bialek

No, self-humiliation can be only the expression of narcissism...

Bartosik

Is the remorse the act of strenght?

Bialek

Not strenght, but dignity. Remorse is the expression of dignity. The dignity of man, dignity of christian is expressing in the feeling of his own weakness, his own sinness, because he causes suffering to others, even when he doesn't want this. He disappoints himself, even when he doesn't want this so strong. John Paul II had understood this and expressed this. Shame is an awful thing. Those, who cry so loudly „We did nothing wrong - these are Germans, NKWD, Soviets, Jews" are usually these people, who are ashamed and sometimes have a huge, deep feeling of denied guilty. This is my perspective.

Bartosik

Jurij Łotman wrties about this in his famous essay about the role of fear and shame in culture. Fear of shame - and so of to admit to shameful events from our own life or nation's history - is the highest form of denying to fear. According to remorse and admitting to the truth about myself, I was very moved by your words during the ceremony in Kielce in 2010. You said: „There are different languages of our prayers, but the tears are always the same. The most important prayer is silence, so we will be also silent". These words received a strong actualisation in the context of visit pope Francis in Auschwitz. Before the arrive to dead camp he said: „„I would like to go alone to this place of horror and to pray to Lord about the mercy of crying". Only this".

Bialek

It is a beautiful words of pope. I connect them with the fact, that we, the Poles, still don't bewail all our deads. Bewailing only the part of deads makes no sense. If the members of your family died in the car accident, would you bewail only a few? You should bewail all. And actually we don't bewail Jews and Poles - unfortunately this distinguishing still exists.

The example, that we still don't bewail our deads, can be the political games around the anniversaries of Warsaw Uprising. Booing on Powązki Cemetery, shouts and burning the flares - it is the effect of unbewailing of our deads. This is why we need the gift of cry, but it do not come, when we start talk too much. Francis prayed in Aschwitz for the grace of cry, because he known, the he and our church, and the world, and you, and me don't bewail all, who died in this horrible place. He wanted us to „cry with those, who cry”, as Saint Paul wrote. There are the places in which you should think at first and also are the places in which you should cry at first. Auschwitz, Kielce, Jedwabne are in the second group... But maybe Francies wanted to cry also over himself.

Bartosik

So we are coming to the started point. Christianity is calling us to be with suffering people. W can't be physically with those, who are dead, and cry is the only one way to make contact with them.

Bialek

In the face of such huge tragedy, which mind can't grasp, cry is the only form of contact with myself. Sometimes you have to cry over yourself. In the Gospel we read: „Don't cry over Me; you should cry over you”.