
12-21-2021

Arts & Literature: Making Art Out of History's Tragedies—An Interview with Grzegorz Kwiatkowski

Sanford M. Jacoby
University of California, Los Angeles

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Jacoby, Sanford M. (2021) "Arts & Literature: Making Art Out of History's Tragedies—An Interview with Grzegorz Kwiatkowski," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 15: Iss. 3: 18–23.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.3.1875>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol15/iss3/6>

This Arts & Literature is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Arts & Literature: Making Art Out of History's Tragedies—An Interview with Grzegorz Kwiatkowski

Acknowledgements

Grzegorz Kwiatkowski is a Polish poet and musician. Here he reflects on the violence perpetrated in Poland during the Second World War, and the dualities of the Polish experience. Is it possible for art to reckon with the darkness, free of melodrama and kitsch?

Arts & Literature: Making Art Out of History's Tragedies—An Interview with Grzegorz Kwiatkowski

Sanford M. Jacoby

*University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.*

About the Piece

This interview was conducted via e-mail in November 2021. Grzegorz Kwiatkowski was in Gdańsk and Sanford Jacoby in Los Angeles. They met through Grzegorz's poetry and discovered that they shared K. Z. Stutthof, a concentration camp in Poland, as a presence in their lives. The prisoners included ethnic Poles and Jews (the latter self-identified or categorized as such by the Nazis). It's estimated that nearly two-thirds of its 110,000 inmates were murdered until the camp was closed in May 1945, the last camp liberated by the Allies. Here Kwiatkowski reflects on the violence perpetrated in Poland during the Second World War, and the dualities of the Polish experience. Is it possible for art to reckon with the darkness, free of melodrama and kitsch?

SJ: Through your poetry and music, you've engaged with one of the darkest moments of the 20th century: the torture and murder of millions of people by the Nazis and their collaborators. How did the mass violence of the Second World War become a focus of your art?

GK: As we all know, one of the bloodiest genocides in the history of the world took place on Polish soil. My grandfather Józef and his sister Marta were political prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp called Stutthof, not far from Gdansk.¹ After the war and for the rest of their lives they suffered from the traumas they experienced during their captivity. My great aunt carried the burden of mental illness, while my grandfather was a broken man. Today we might say he had intense post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He was very shy with other people and had difficulty communicating with them. When I was a child, he took me to the museum at Stutthof. It was my first visit and also the first time since my grandfather's release that he returned there. He could not stop screaming and crying. I was shaken. As I thought about it afterwards, questions arose in my mind: Why do people hate each other so deeply that they will commit murder? How can someone like my grandfather be the worst enemy of another human being?

One conception of art in which I believe is that artists are a type of sponge, absorbing the experiences of those around them. I really think that there are epigenetic transmissions of trauma to succeeding generations: from my grandfather to my father and then to me. And not only to me. Poland and other parts of the world are still full of pain passed along in families, even though it's been seventy-five years since the end of the war. We carry within us the voices of ghosts, of the people who were murdered. They are always with me.

¹ The only reliable English-language source on Stutthof is Danuta Drywa, *The Extermination of Jews in Stutthof Concentration Camp, 1939–1945* (Pánstwowe Muzeum Stutthof, 2001).

SJ: Other artists and historians have dwelled on this dark era. It seems that the further away we move from it, the more that is created. What is it that your art adds to the litany?

GK: In my opinion a lot of art dealing with genocide is melodramatic. It's like a horror movie and full of kitsch. Or it's the opposite: very serious, almost sacred. My idea was a Glenn Gould idea—to play in the most anti-melodramatic way that one can imagine. Also, to take the methodology of Edgar Lee Masters, as in his *Spoon River Anthology*, as a matrix for the history of genocide.

Art that addresses genocide needs to be as open as possible for the listener, reader, or observer. The power of art should possess them and take them to the interior of a territory full of paradoxes and super hard questions. And when he or she thinks about this awful past, then they are in some way inside of a problem and a tragedy. But this is true only in some respects, because we can't really touch it. But we can try. By trying to touch it and trying to answer paradoxical questions that have no answers, a person becomes more fragile when confronting evil. And then they can respond by protesting and fighting the evils of their own time.

SJ: Poles, in the past and today, have contested the narrative that portrays Jews as the Nazis' primary victims. What is the source of Polish victimhood? What is the narrative in modern Polish society? By the way, when I say Poles I mean ethnic Poles.

GK: I think that most Poles are not ready to face the fact that they were neither the only, nor the greatest victims of the catastrophe we call the Second World War. I am not a fan of relativization. Yes, I am in love with facts and open to compassion. But the point is that most Europeans behaved in an unbelievably horrible way during the cataclysm. We as Europeans generally failed and behaved immorally.

But of course, most often I consider the Polish demons because Poland is my country. The story of victimized Poles is well known, but there is a dark side that is less well known or repressed. Anyway, I try to reckon with the entire landscape and I try to be as honest as I can. I can't stop thinking about the countries with the greatest responsibility for the Nazi horror. In Austria and Germany, the perpetrators evaded a thorough-going process of de-Nazification. On top of that, they saw themselves as victims.

So, let's try to look at things from a Polish perspective in which there is no real place for responsibility. The wartime suffering of Poles *was* real. They *were* victims. They were betrayed by allies and attacked from both sides by Hitler and Stalin. Then they lived in a poor, repressive society under a Communist regime.

What are the psychological effects of these realities? That we are a country full of resentment. We trust neither the other nor ourselves. In my opinion there is no better thing than responsibility. It's like fresh air. It means being conscious of both bad and good. And it leaves the Polish soul in a very weak state. We are not ready to face our guilt, our own demons. This is very sad.

But, of course it doesn't mean we should wait for better times before trying. There are many people in Poland, including artists and scholars, who try to wake up Polish souls by addressing our responsibility and our guilt. But this group is a minority. The other problem is how it is being done. Many of the people who speak about the horrors of the past do so speaking a language of hate. It's paradoxical and tragic that there are Polish intellectuals whose vocabulary is vicious. Cynical politicians manipulate and distort history.

I understand outrage, and we have to speak up when someone says odious things. But to humiliate people with whom you do not agree, well, it's too much for me. Thus, Poland is an intoxicated land—on both sides, left and right. Also, I don't want to play games in anyone's party except my party. Its name is: to understand, to avoid hating, to protest, to share and protect memories of the victims, and last but not least—to create art that is made from beauty.

It's not easy. How can we make art out of history's tragedies that also is in some way beautiful? Is that poetry or anti-poetry? I think the point is to find the rhythm of Glenn Gould—to search for a kind of natural music in real voices and not to aestheticize them. In some way we must let ghosts speak for themselves and clear some territory around them. A non-theatrical stage must be built, somehow, where individual histories are presented without the fireworks of kitsch. I think that the most important thing is to speak about the genocide's tragic territory in every way we can.

I am not a fan of dogmatism and censorship. For example, I guess that I am on the same methodological side as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. But when I hear someone assert that *Schindler's List* is a sugar-coated scandal and the movie should not exist, I think that they don't get the point, which in my opinion is the education of future generations and sharing with them the horrors of genocide and hatred. Otherwise, the stories will vanish. That's why Claude Lanzmann is a hero to me, as are Steven Spielberg and also Joshua Oppenheimer, who directed *The Act of Killing*.

SJ: The relationship between Poles and Jews was and is a source of controversy. Your poetry mentions wartime violence perpetrated not only by Germans but also by Poles. What's the point?

GK: Well... Polish people, like most Europeans, were deeply anti-Semitic to the point of murdering their own neighbors. This is the fact. And you can find these stories everywhere. You just have to listen carefully. I will tell you a story that happened two months ago. One of my best friends told me that his grandfather was from the city of Kielce and that suddenly after the war he left the place and changed his name. My friend wasn't suspicious of his grandfather. But I was. So immediately I said, "Maybe he was one of the murderers during the Kielce Pogrom?" And in the end, I was right. He was murderer.

Here's another example. My wife's family is Jewish. But they don't speak about it; they almost reject it. And I found this out by accident. My wife's grandmother told me that during the war she hid in the forest near the city of Rzeszów. When I asked her if she was Jewish, she began to tell me anti-Semitic stories from the Middle Ages, and said that she hates Jewish people very much and so on. Even today, the family is afraid of their origins, their roots. Two of

the greatest Polish artists—poet Tadeusz Różewicz and writer Stanisław Lem—were Jews. But they didn't want to talk about it. I think that they too were afraid.

SJ: A related question involves Stalin, who has been accused of murdering more people than the Nazis, including many Poles. Yet your poetry dwells on the Nazi genocide. Is there a reason?

GK: In my poetry there are stories from Rwanda as well as stories of Stalin's ghosts and victims. But you are right that most of the stories are about Nazi perpetrators and their victims. I think this is the point of Gdansk. I was born and I live in Gdansk, where the Second World War began. For centuries before that, it was a German-speaking city and was annexed by Prussia in the late 18th century. It's the place where Arthur Schopenhauer was born. I love his writing. After my grandfather's imprisonment in Stuffhof, he was forced to be a Wehrmacht soldier, like most Polish men from the Kaszuby region where Gdansk is located. This German history is part of my family's history.

The past is bloody and complicated, and we have to stay as close as we can to the facts. The Red Army that "liberated" Poland near the end of the war raped Polish women on a massive scale, especially women from Kaszuby, where my family has lived for generations. So, I asked my father: Were your mother and grandmother raped by Russians? And he said: of course not. It's a lie. But I kept asking and asking and asking. This is my method—to be persistent. Finally, he told me that a Red Army officer lived in their house and that was why the women were saved from this tragedy. But the problem is that almost all the women and their families from Kaszuby claim the same thing: that they were protected and saved by good Red Army officers. So, you can see that my birthplace is a land of blood and tears. Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* ostensibly is about the Congo. But it also is about other places where the human heart causes darkness, places like Poland, and potentially all places on earth where there are human beings.

SJ: Over the past four decades, there's been a search for reconciliation between Poles and Jews. Please tell us what you think about this.

GK: I think that almost no one is searching for reconciliation other than a super small group. I believe in the power of truth, that facts are as important as the power of love and forgiveness. It is the combination of these things—of truth joined to love and forgiveness—that creates a powerful moral force. Once you are a human being the best thing you can do is to accept your susceptibility to evil while also recognizing that you are capable of love and friendship, of helping and forgiving. Of course, it's easy to speak about these things as a member of the third generation of a family that faced genocide. I have the luxury of temporal distance. And sometimes this distance is a good thing. But at other times you say things too casually, too full of naivety. How can you tell someone who was raped or whose relatives were brutally murdered—for example in Rwanda—come on, forgive the perpetrators. Listen to your heart. Please be more open. And so forth. So, as you can see, in the end I just don't know. I try to be optimistic. But when I hear people preaching, including

myself, I don't feel comfortable with it. On the other hand, I don't want to be possessed by darkness.

SJ: Can you say something about your activities beyond the desk and stage?

GK: I am trying to find some kind of moral and artistic platforms at universities such as Berkeley, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, and Chicago, and others. At Oxford, I co-host a workshop called Virus of Hate. I also try to intervene and protest when I think something is wrong.

For example, a few years ago, my friend and I found almost half a million shoes near the Stutthof museum. They had belonged to victims of concentration camps throughout Europe. Stutthof was the place where the Germans sent shoes to be repaired and used by civilians in Germany and by the army. But these artifacts were lying in the forest, on the ground and underneath. We fought against this for many years, urging the museum to display and protect these material manifestations of genocide. In some ways we failed. After years of battle, the museum officials “cleaned” the area where the shoes were located. They moved them to the museum but buried them again. They are invisible. And of course, they should be seen, they should say to all of us—we will never forget. Never again. But I won't give up. I remain optimistic. I will find a way to expose and secure them.

SJ: Your band is called Trupa Trupa. Its music has been described as noir, existential, and psychedelic. Do you agree? What is the relationship between your music and your poetry? And by the way, what does Trupa Trupa mean?

GK: Trupa Trupa has a democratic structure, so the band has no single ideological line. Every one of us infuses the band's music with our own feelings and conceptions. My contribution is of course pretty much the same as my poetry. That's why there is a song called “Never Forget” that was inspired by Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. I truly believe in the power of art to expose dark truths. By doing that it can foster moral awakening. When the darkness is very dark it needs light.

Trupa Trupa can have the same meaning as nothing or it can mean a corpse, a dead body or even a theatrical troupe. It's open for interpretation. Like the music of the band; we are open.

SJ: How have your poetry and music been received in Poland? What about outside Poland?

GK: In most cases it's been received positively. But both Trupa Trupa and my poetry have a bigger following outside Poland than within.

SJ: Genocide has been part of human societies for thousands of years. Some anthropologists claim that genocide is hard-wired in the human psyche. They trace it to conflict between bands of apes who fought each other over territorial access to food. The implication is that ethnic and racial violence will always be with us. Is there any hope for the future?

GK: I am sure that we cannot give up. We must keep trying. The most important thing is to find the evil that exists within all of us. If you can find it—your potential to kill—then you've taken a step towards responsibility for yourself and for humanity. In my opinion it's possible to change, to be someone else who, as yet, doesn't exist in the real world. I think that goodness is a kind of miracle. I also think that my city of Gdansk is a great example of a kind of hope machine. Lech Walesa came from Gdansk. Solidarity, the worker movement, was established here. The Solidarity movement peacefully destroyed one of the most repressive Communist regimes in Europe. It was a miracle. A miracle of goodness.

Grzegorz Kwiatkowski (b. 1984)—a Polish poet and musician, is the author of several books of poetry revolving around the subjects of history, remembrance and ethics. He is a member of a psychedelic rock band, Trupa Trupa. More on him, <https://grzegorzkwiatkowski.com/en/>.

Sanford Jacoby (b. 1953), the interviewer, is a professor at UCLA. His uncle and cousins were prisoners in Stutthof.