

Volhynia Massacre

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The Witnesses

“Swing your sickle, swing your knife, at the ‘Liakh’ to take his life” — Accounts of the Survivors of the Volhynian Massacres

“Difficult memories” is a term used about the accounts of the genocide on Poles in the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Republic of Poland, that is, the massacres that took place during World War two in Volhynia and eastern Galicia. Accounts given by witnesses of those events show that this term has deep meaning on two levels: on the literal level and, first and foremost, on the visual level, because we can see the survivors expressing their emotions in front of the camera. The unique character of the accounts presented below consists not only in the fact that the narrators are dealing with difficult and traumatic issues, but also in the fact that in 1943 they were just children or adolescents. If we ourselves tried to recall the times when we were just ten or nine years old, would we produce such detailed accounts?

This study focuses on the accounts of five Polish inhabitants of various localities on the Eastern Borderlands: Anna Szumska, Jan Michalewski, Jadwiga Majewska, Kazimierz Kobylarz, and Zygmunt Jan Borcz. Although tensions in Polish-Ukrainian relations had been visible before the war, the coexistence of the two national groups on the local, community level was generally regarded as neighborly. Anna Szumska (born in 1919 and the oldest of the five survivors) recalls the Polish-Ukrainian village of Borki near Luboml: “We and the Ukrainians lived together in the same village. Peacefully. Like neighbors. We visited one another. My first cousin married a Ukrainian. They got married and baptized their children in a [Roman Catholic] church. Poles would invite Ukrainians over to celebrate Polish holidays and vice versa.”

Jan Michalewski from Hucisko Brodzkie (born in 1938) recalls what his father told him: “when a Ukrainian farmer [...] was celebrating a holiday, his Polish neighbor would not thresh or chop wood in order to show respect for that Ukrainian holiday. And that Ukrainian neighbor would do the same for his Polish neighbors.” The buildings on Anna Szumska’s family farm were destroyed in the aftermath of the German invasion of the USSR, launched in June 1941. Then, too, the family’s Ukrainian neighbors helped and sympathized with them. “They gave us some grain and some fodder for the cows for winter. A Ukrainian comes and says: ‘I’ve got some hay. Come take some.’ After a while another one comes. ‘I’ll give you potatoes from my stores.’ And somehow we got by. But things got worse. Slaughters started. Somebody would come from other villages and say that a [Polish] family had been slaughtered there. When we asked who the victims were, he’d say: “some Liakhs.” They no longer said ‘Poles’ but ‘Liakhs’. What did that word — ‘Liakhs’ — mean? We didn’t understand it then.” Jan Michalewski was but a child when Ukrainian nationalism began to develop. Nonetheless, he well recalls certain bloody symptoms of the growing nationalism: “News came to our village that the headmaster’s two sons had been murdered in Jesionów — a rural commune. They were coming back from their lodgings. Their parents waited in vain. In the morning the boys were found beat to death. From then on in Hucisko we knew that it was the beginning of Ukrainian

nationalism. The next incident was the murder of Father Walczak [probably Father Piotr Walczak from the Ławrów parish (Turka county), who was beaten up, thrown into a well, and stoned alive]. He was buried in the cemetery in Huta Pieniacka. People say that about three thousand people took part in his funeral procession, but I can't really remember that. The procession was long. [...] Mom said that few managed to hold back tears while his coffin was being lowered into the grave. That priest had been helpful and friendly toward all national groups."

During 1941–1942 the Germans exterminated the entire Jewish population of those territories with the help of Ukrainian police. Anna Szumska was an eyewitness of the massacre of Jews in Luboml. "I saw the guards escorting a large group of Jews. There was only one German. He was walking with a dog. [...] Near my village of Borki there was a place where they made bricks and they drove them there. The ditches were ready. And that was where they murdered them. [...] The next day the Ukrainian village reeve comes to get people to bury the Jewish corpses. [...] He requested one person from each home." Anna Szumska volunteered along with other women from her village. While they were covering up the bodies in a ditch, another group of Jews was brought to the site. "They ordered us to go behind the hill. One of the Germans made sure that we didn't watch. I heard shots and the sound of bodies falling into the ditch. After a while a policeman came and said: 'Get over there and bury them!' The Ukrainian policemen executed the Jews and forced the women to work faster. The German didn't hurry the women. He only stood and watched."

From that moment on Ukrainian nationalist organizations — the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists — focused on the extermination of Poles, who were an ethnic minority in those territories. The genocide on Poles began in 1943 in Volhynia, while the climax of the massacres in eastern Małopolska came in 1944. The participation of the Ukrainian clergy was significant. In many localities Orthodox priests (and Greek Catholic priests in eastern Małopolska) consecrated the murder tools. Despite her father's prohibition, Anna Szumska went with her first cousin to the neighboring village of Horodno to see why Ukrainians were meeting there. We arrive. There's plenty of people. An altar's been erected by the lake. The Orthodox priest's already there. Many wagons have already arrived from afar. We stand next to a Ukrainian woman and we listen on. The priest is praying. And the people, mostly men, are all holding various objects: axes, knives, scythes, and pitchforks. What for? The Orthodox priest is praying. He turns to the people [and says]: 'The time has come to seize your own' He told them so and at last he says: 'Swing your sickle, swing your knife, at the 'Lakh' to take his life.' That is, he told them to slaughter the Poles And we stand there. A Ukrainian boy approaches us — he was friends with my bother once. His name was Andrey. He says, 'Girls, what are you doing here? Run away. If somebody says that you're Polish, you won't go home alive.'" The accounts given by surviving eye witnesses of the genocide on Poles are the most valuable and the most tragic. Even though the survivors have aged, their accounts are still ones of child victims of the Volhynian genocide. Surprisingly, the accounts of the events as seen through the eyes of children are highly, or even exceedingly, detailed – sometimes dry and concise. Kazimierz Kobylarz (born in 1928) remembers the day of July 12, 1943 perfectly well — he was 15 years old then. "The neighboring village of Maria Wola, next to Ułanówka, was set ablaze. My sister had gone there with her friend Martykówna to try on some costumes at a seamstress'. But she didn't come back. [...] We fled from the farm: my father, mother, nephew, I, my older brother Tadzik,

and my brother Staszek. We ran down into the crop field, that's where we hid." After some time Kazimierz Kobylarz's father decided to return home with Kazimierz's mother and nephew. They were stopped on their way by a Ukrainian with a machine gun and our Ukrainian neighbor, Kulish. Kazimierz and his brothers crawled up near the German cemetery near their home. "Suddenly, we hear our father shout, 'Jesus Christ!' I guess he shouted twice, and then silence fell. No shot. A second later he hear a Ukrainian voice saying, 'I davwshtchczob vona perekynulas.' Something like that. And a shot. We didn't hear anything about my nephew. When we heard the shot and our father's shout we started crawling out from the German cemetery to help our father if possible. In the meantime, we got to the road that ran by Kulisz's farm. [...] And we hear the sound of horses and spokes and we see an entire cavalcade approaching. We stopped in the crop field three or five meters away from the road. We lay down flat. My brother told us not to make a sound. While they were passing us, we could see them sitting on the horse wagons. They had machine guns - 'pepeshas', they were called. We could see the barrels. [...] and when they had driven past us, we crawled across the road and went uphill to our farm. [...] My brother saw our father lying dead on the ground. [...] We started to look for our mother. She was lying outside the house. She may have taken shelter and gone out when she heard our father shouting. She may have wanted to help him. And she was hit. The bullet went in here [he points to his right cheek] and went out somewhere here [he lifts his left hand up to his left ear]. She was lying on her back. We didn't find my nephew even though we tried. He must have escaped into the crop field. He was nine."

The Ukrainians were getting closer. After a while shots were fired. Kazimierz and his brother had to flee again. Not until many years later did he learn the location of his parents' graves and what had happened with his nephew. "Sikorska [his neighbor] told me how she and Kalinowski had taken [the bodies of] my parents [from our farm]. They buried them as best they could: they dug a hole and wrapped them in a sheet. And she said, 'I found Boluś,' that is my nephew, 'in a crop field. He had been shot on the ankle. He died clutching the grain stalks.' He must have died of exhaustion, due to loss of blood."

Jadwiga Majewska (born in 1933) was just ten years old in July 1943. She witnessed the massacre in Huta Stepańska. "I keep reminiscing about the events of July 16, 1943. We had to gather in the school building. That was that famous act of self-defense. It was the beginning of fight to defend ourselves. There were lots of people in the school building, ones from other localities, too. [...] We stayed there until July 18, and then we got an order to retreat to Sarny, closer to the railway, there where the Germans were. [...] We hurried home. Everybody took whatever they could. I was the only one who stayed behind because I decided to return home to get the picture I got for my first Communion. I ran after the wagon but there were too many people. [...] Mom was shouting and stretching out her arms to help me onto the wagon but I slipped behind because of that crowd. I saw many corpses. I remember that we were attacked during our escape. I saw the Banderites shooting and shouting: 'Hoorah, kill the Liakhs.' I was so scared that I jumped over the ditch because I saw some people running into the forest. [...] I lost my shoe and that picture there. I was wearing my first Communion dress dyed blue. [...] I saw a dead woman with her belly cut open. A child was sitting next to her, crying. I saw other corpses too. While I was running into the forest I saw my uncle, my father's brother, running with his fiancée. She grabbed my hand and we walked

until dusk. Then we walked on during the night and the next day, until we reached Sarny.”

Thereafter Jadwiga Majewska made it to Równe with her uncle and aunt. For some time she thought that her entire family was dead. “And then I got news that my parents were alive and that they were in a camp in a forest. And the person who brought that news was to take me to them. We returned to Sarny, where my neighbor was waiting for me. I was very surprised that she was wearing a fur coat in July. I remember that she wrapped me in it when she greeted me. Only later did I find out that when you have to flee you take the most valuable thing you have.”

The UPA also murdered Ukrainians that were sympathetic toward Poles. Ukrainians who warned or sheltered Poles, or opposed the murder of their neighbors, were regarded as traitors and collaborators by the OUN/UPA. Those married to Poles could lose their lives, too. Anna Szumska talks about such an incident: “My [first] cousin was our neighbor in our village. Her husband was Ukrainian. While we were fleeing, my father told him: ‘My friend, flee, take your children, and flee.’ ‘Oh, I won’t. I have two brothers and two brothers-in-law, who are Ukrainian. They’ll protect me. They won’t let them hurt me.’ When the massacre started, his family didn’t even know that he died. [...] He was outside. They came and smashed his head with an ax. Then they went in. His wife was sleeping in bed. When they struck the woman in the head with an ax, then her son, about nine or ten years old, sprang up and cried, ‘Stepan, don’t kill me! I’ll give you some bread!’ This means that it was a man the child knew. And that man struck the boy with an ax in the head, and the child collapsed onto the floor. The two eldest boys (one was perhaps 12 and the other 14) were sleeping up on the stove and thus survived. [...] They were afraid to come down. The Germans came in the morning and started to take out the bodies of their mother and brother. When the boys saw this one of them cried out in fear.”

Jan Michalewski (born in 1938) was six years old on February 13, 1944. His village, Hucisko Brodzkie, was destroyed as a result of a raid. “A heavy fusillade started around midday on Sunday. Our home was thrown into confusion. At first, I was locked in a chest with my cousin Janek. They began to block the door with a beam, so that the Ukrainians couldn’t force it open when they came to break in or to shoot. [...] We started screaming in that chest. They opened it and somebody said: ‘Take the children and flee.’ And my aunt grabbed me and her son Janek, and helped us leave the house. We were fleeing toward Wołochy — a neighboring Polish-Ukrainian village. We could already smell [the houses burning] and we heard shots. There was chaos all around us. We walked with a group of thirty or forty people along a ravine until we reached the neighboring village. And I remember that they put some straw on the ground. I remember that they brought my father in the evening. He was unconscious and his left side was covered in blood. They laid him on the straw in the corner of that flat. And every half an hour my father moaned: ‘Finish me off.’ Mom was crying and moistening his lips. And my first cousin Janek and I were praying on our knees. [...] I wanted to see my brother Tadeusz. It was on the second day after the attack. I must have wept hard because my grandpa said, ‘Come, I’ll show you.’ I can clearly see that image to this day. My brother was lying on a *weret*, as we called checked blankets on the Eastern Borderlands. My grandpa lifted the blanket a little and I saw where the bullet had entered my brother’s little head above his cheek. Here [he points at his temple] he had something like a cut — the bullet went in through there. Grandpa didn’t want to show me the other side of his head, which was supposedly shattered. After showing him to me,

grandpa wrapped up the body and put it in a box. I remember that he threw a machine gun over his shoulders, put the box under his arm, and went off to the cemetery to bury it.”

The father of Zygmunt Jan Borcz (born in 1931) was the headmaster of a school in Rakowiec located 20 km from Lvov.

“On Palm Sunday of 1944 [the witness made a mistake; the events he is talking about took place on March 26, 1944, that is, a week before Palm Sunday] I went to church for the High Mass. [...] My father stayed with my brother in the school building [where we lived]. They woke up to the sound of shots. A man with a machine gun was standing by the window and was shooting at the people fleeing from the church. They immediately ran into the forest. I was in the church, in the sacristy. The priest [that is, Father Błażej Jurasz] suddenly stopped his sermon. I saw him running from the pulpit to the sacristy. He unlocked the door leading outside, and I followed him. A Ukrainian standing in the snow shot at the priest. The priest collapsed. I found out later that he was wounded. The sacristan grabbed me by the collar and threw me back into the sacristy. I ask him: ‘What will happen to us?’. And he says: ‘Nothing. They’ll slaughter us.’ I saw a gap behind the altar. Some people had already sheltered there, so there was no space for me. The Ukrainians were standing in front of the main glass door. They had their machine guns pointed at the people lying on the floor. The women used to wear big kerchiefs, which were now lying on the floor. At that moment I saw people heading up from the choir. I rushed into the vestibule, where the Ukrainians were, and I opened the door to the choir. I rushed up the stairs. But the Poles were already pulling up the ladder, shouting: ‘Pull up the ladder, because the Banderites are after him!’ But somebody did lower the ladder for me. I jumped, grabbed it, and they pulled me up. This was how I ended up in the attic. The people were climbing onto the beams for shelter. I was too short for that. I saw a gap in the stretch of the roof. I went in and got as far as the altar. There was a boy who could speak Ukrainian. The Ukrainians went up and opened fire. A shot and then the sound of a body hitting the floor. They lit up the gap with torches and wanted to get in but they would have had to crawl to do so. And that boy said in Ukrainian, ‘We have knives. We’ll slit your throats.’ And they didn’t come in. It got silent in the church after all that screaming and shouting. After some time, but I don’t know how long, we heard a lady screaming: ‘The Ukrainians are gone. They’ve gone to the forest after the escapees.’

Other sources inform us what happened later. The armed group of UPA members escorted the column of parishioners to an execution site. A few people who tried to escape were killed. The subsequent events show the other side of Polish-Ukrainian relations. We know today that the Greek Catholic priest, Barezyuk, and the village reeve, Ptashnik, made it possible for Poles to buy their lives, which saved them. This is precisely what makes the memory of the Volhynian massacres so difficult.

Rafał B. Pękała



[Anna Szumska](#)



[Zygmunt Jan Borcz](#)



[Jadwiga Majewska](#)



[Jan Michalewski](#)



[Kazimierz Kobylarz](#)

Photo gallery

