

Post-traumatic suffering of the families of the Augustów Roundup's victims based on the documentaries of Alicja Maciejowska

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ABSTRACT

Augustów Roundup for families that experienced this catastrophe was an event known as "slash in time". The suffering it caused divided lives of many people into time before and after the roundup. This experience obscured the drama of the recently ended war, and at the same time it was an apex of the misery for communities of the North-Eastern Poland during the 6 years of war and post-war. The

trauma of war had not been yet overcome when the first months of "liberation" in 1945 brought about a tragedy that resulted in mental and physical suffering of the orphaned for decades. They could talk about it publicly for the first time in over 40 years. It was registered by Alicja Maciejowska.

Keywords: post-traumatic sufferers, Augustów Roundup, radio documentary

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for you, the war may yet begin

According to Stanisława Bujnowska – one of the protagonists of Alicja Maciejowska's broadcast titled 'United', those are the words spoken to her by a Soviet captain on July 1945, two months before the World War II ended, and soon before her husband's arrest.

INTRODUCTION

Augustów Roundup for families that experienced this catastrophe was an event known as "*slash in time*" [1].

In July 1945, on the territories of the four present-day counties of the Podlaskie Voivodeship and the border areas of present-day Lithuania and Belarus, the Soviet Army with the support of the Polish officers of security services and army caught over 7,000 people suspected of supporting the anti-communist resistance underground. At least 592 of them were murdered in the unknown place by the SMERSH - Soviet military counterintelligence, and these were not the only fatalities of the raid. The whole military operation involving over 50,000 Soviet soldiers and the murder of the victims were planned by the Soviet authorities and mostly carried out by them. The crime was secret and well hidden. This kind of crime – as Jan Jerzy Milewski wrote – is a perfect crime, mainly because the heirs of those who committed it still protect the criminals [2]. To this day, according to the official Russian narrative - "*the further fate of the arrested [592 of them] is unknown*" [3]. In the case of this crime, classified as genocide, an investigation is being carried out by the Branch Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Białystok.

Crime struck the local community, destroyed families, often led to misery. It caused a long-term trauma that dragged on in time due to the impossibility of mourning for the missing, because their death was not acknowledged, also due to the impossibility of expressing suffering, and finally stigmatization of families who had to remain silent in fear of repression by the communist authorities [4].

The oppressive silence around the crime lasted until the end of the 1980s. In mid-1987, the discovery of a mass grave in the forest near Giby caused a wide open dispute about the roundup. This moved the local community and the families of the victims who believed that the burial place of their relatives was found. The topic of the raid appeared in the media. Foreign journalists became interested in the case. Finally, it was the subject of a press conference held by government's spokesman Jerzy Urban, who denied that such an event had taken place. However, this could not be hidden or stopped anymore since the information about the mysterious crime caused unrest.

Soon the Citizens' Committee for the Search of Residents Lost in Suwałki Region in July 1945 was established. It was created and aided by, among others, Mirosław Basiewicz, Piotr Bajer, Stanisław Kowalczyk, Paweł Mikłasz, Alicja Maciejowska, Janina Jankowska, Maria Chwalibóg, Danuta and Jan Krzywosz.

Its goal was to lead a thorough exhumation of the mass grave near Giby, which, as it turned out, also hides the remains of the Wehrmacht soldiers. The main focus, however, was on determining the number of victims of the roundup and gathering as much information about them as possible.

The work of the committee members could not be overestimated. They developed about 400 questionnaires for the missing, which are now in the investigation materials and are an invaluable source for historians researching the Augustów Roundup. They recorded several hundred testimonies of the victims' families in which, for the first time, they could speak outside their family group, not hiding the truth about their loved ones, their own emotions and suffering. These recordings became the material of the documentary programs referred to in this article.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Alicja Maciejowska (1929-2016) – a radio journalist, reporter, documentarian. Connected with regional radio stations and nationwide Polish Radio agencies. Connected with the Solidarity opposition and detained under martial law. Co-organizer and activist of Citizens' Committee for the Search of Residents Lost in Suwałki Region in July 1945. She recorded confessions of the victims of the roundup. An author of books.

The subject of this analysis are four programs by Alicja Maciejowska broadcast nationwide on Polish Radio in 1989-1992: 'Like a Stone', 'United', 'He Was Like a Flower, or Shot Everyday Life' and 'Roundup'. The accounts of witnesses included in these documents were - as mentioned - obtained primarily as a part of work of the Citizens' Committee for the Search, conducted since 1987. The first two programs "Like a Stone" and "United" were broadcast successively in July and October 1989. "United" and "He was like a Flower" were signed with a sound signal of the "Solidarity" Citizens' Committee.

They all contain stories revolving around one topic – loss. It is the loss – of close relatives and the level and dimension of life that influenced the fate of the interviewees. It became - as Barbara Skarga stated - a trace in the psyche that doesn't fade with time, and is able to reverse time [5].

The first broadcast tells the story of the Świerzbński family from the village of Jaziewo in the Augustów township. The head of the family -

Klemens - was one of the victims murdered in the raid. His parents, sister, wife and child were deported to the Soviet Union during the Soviet occupation. About the fact that Klemens was killed, his mother, wife and daughter - these only survived the deportation - learned after returning to the country in 1946. In the broadcast about the tragic fate tell his mother and daughter - Franciszka and Krystyna Świerzbńska.

"*United*" was broadcast just before the *All Saints' Day 1989*. The editor Maciejowska noted that not everyone can visit the graves of their loved ones because some do not have them. "There are people whose life was affected by the lack of loved ones and the fact that they [loved ones] do not have a place of rest" [6] - this introduction begins with the story of four women from the Augustów region who lost their husbands in the raid. Anna Bakuniewicz from Serwy, Melania Butkiewicz from Czarniewo, Anna Pużyńska from Augustów and Stanisława Bujnowska from Ponizie talk about the dramatic fate of their families, about the fight for their support and the harm caused by the loss.

The third program broadcast on August 3, 1990 begins with media coverage of the opening of the exhibition dedicated to the victims of the raid in Suwałki. It was made with the photos of the victims that the family had lent to the Citizens' Committee for the Search. The missing, immortalized in the photographs were reminisced by, among others, brothers of: Helena Aldona Wnukowska and Zofia Pawełko, wives of: Bronisław Laskowski, Mieczysław Orłowski and Wiktor Gruszewski.

The last document titled "Roundup" was broadcast on July 1992 and contained, among others, the account of Ireneusz Rapczyński from Sumów, who lost his father in the roundup. There were also noted the circumstances surrounding the formation of the monument in Giby and the current state of activities related to the explanation of the circumstances of the raid. These four programs were published on a CD attached to the book "Terminated Resumes" by Alicja Maciejowska, dedicated to the victims of the Augustów Roundup and published by the Białystok branch of the Institute of National Remembrance [7].

All of these productions are documentaries. It's a radio genre which - according to Robert McLeish - should contain facts and opinions based on documented data - documents, records, reports, statements that can be attributed to a specific person, including interviews with witnesses, memoirs, diaries, chronicles etc. [8]. All analyzed radio programmes meet the genre criteria. Their value, after several decades since the broadcast, is even greater because the events and opinions recorded at that time have now become a distant history and have gained the importance of a historical source. This is primarily about information on the investigation launched in 1991 by the Prosecutor's

Office in Suwałki regarding the raid, statements of the, at that time, officials: Bronisław Geremek (1932-2008) - referring to the attempts to explain the circumstances of the crime and Cezary Chlebowski (1928-2013) - regarding the searching for graves of victims.

It should be remembered that the message contained in the programmes results from the selection made by the author, the choice of witnesses' statements, the design of the program, and the distribution of accents. The choice is subjective. Therefore, the question may be asked whether, through the subjective choice of the author, an objective picture of events was possible to convey. It may be of some importance, because Maciejowska was emotionally connected with the problem of the roundup due to her involvement in the work of the Citizens' Committee for the Search. I believe that the author has managed to present the situation in a way that meets all the principles of an objective journalistic work. The selection of materials reflects the essence of families' tragedy, and at the same time the gravity of the crime. The fact that most reviews are from women's side also shows that they - often left in a dramatic situation - have become victims of the crimes committed on their families. Besides there is a comparative material, which allows us to state that the broadcasts have preserved objectivity and reliability. These are several dozens of hours of witnesses' reports recorded by the committee on the account of the raid. The material provided by the Citizens' Committee for the Search is in the resources of the Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance.

Alicja Maciejowska's broadcasts were the first radio recordings about the raid that appeared on Polish Radio. At the same time, they were the first documentaries dedicated to this tragedy. Polish Radio Białystok, covering the Suwałki and Augustów region, didn't air the first programmes about the raid until 1996. At that time, on the air of Polish Radio Białystok, Stanisław Poznański's (1942-2013) productions were broadcast.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The value of Maciejowska's broadcast as a research material lies primarily in the "precedence" of the recording of the autobiographical data and its message. After all, it was forbidden to speak of or commemorate the victims for over 40 years, and the communist authorities refused to acknowledge the fact of this Soviet crime. The relatives of the victims had stigma of "bandits", they were often victims of social exclusion and oppression. As Anna Pużyńska recalled: "*After the war there was this UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration - an international organization created in 1943 to help the devastated countries of Europe and Asia after World War II), I did not get*

anything, even to wrap up a finger. At school, they gave children clothes and shoes and everything. They gave my children nothing. Children of the bandit are entitled to nothing" [6]. The memory about the victims was usually limited to home. The closest relatives also had to limit the showing of suffering. It meant, in other words, that they should have stayed unnoticeable in the society. The members of the committee, among them Alicja Maciejowska, were the first friendly people from the outside who woke up the dormant emotions, heard memories and made notes. They also became the first non-family witnesses of the suffering those families had endured.

The main characters of the programmes are mostly women: eight wives who lost their husbands in the roundup and remained the sole breadwinners for their children as well as two women who lost their fathers. Two short statements belong to Zofia Pawełko and Helena Aldona Wnukowska who lost their brothers. The last broadcast ends with the Ireneusz Rapczyński's memory (from Sumów) of his lost father Stanisław.

All witnesses are joined by the fact of experiencing a traumatic event, an act of violence striking their family, a catastrophe, which caused loss and became the source of suffering. The post-traumatic stress disorder of the raid has never been investigated. Based on research relating to other groups affected by trauma, it should be assumed that it caused the intensity of negative emotions - despair, fear, impuissance - and left a lasting mark on the psyche [9,10]. Moreover, it could not be overestimated. Furthermore, assuming that the family is a dependent and related system, the consequences of the harm concerned all its members. They influenced individual roles in this system: mothers who were forced to play the role of fathers at that time – mostly in maintaining and keeping a roof over the family, children who had to take over the roles of parents - both in the existential and emotional sphere [11]. It is not known what the consequences of trauma were in the next generations. Using Ewa Jackowska's research on the post-traumatic stress disorder and suffering of the Sybiraks' group it should be repeated after the researcher that "traumatic situations mostly disturb the children's psychological structure. The less mature personality, the more destructive consequences of trauma" [12], therefore we can assume that such phenomena have occurred, but the scale cannot be determined.

Despite the fact that more than 40 years have passed since the tragedy, the emotions of the witnesses were very vivid and clear. In spite of such a long period of time, the experienced suffering was strongly rooted, as evidenced by the relations of the recorded women. According to Ewa Jackowska, the strong rooting of suffering in the human psyche results from the specific feature of autobiographical

memory - the fact that it is coupled with emotions [13]. The events that the families of the victims of the raid had experienced were undoubtedly of traumatic stimuli, and those that remained in their memory had left painful marks for many years. The effects of the raid have directly affected several hundred families, from which husbands, fathers, sons and brothers had disappeared. Among the murdered victims there were also more than 20 young women. The rural family model, when deprived of a man, was often unable to support itself and run the household. In an official document, authorities of the Giby municipality stated that those who had disappeared without a trace were "*mostly fathers of families, their sole hosts, [...] who had left behind women and small children,*" and therefore "a significant number of farms in the absence of male went to wrack and ruin" [13]. After the devastation of war, sometimes without a roof over their head, some families found themselves on the verge of poverty. The dramatic situation was intensified by Soviet terror, looting, rape, life in an atmosphere of fear and facing "*disparaging attitude [of Soviets] towards the Polish population*" [14]. The burden of supporting children fell on women who became the largest disadvantaged group. The burden which they were laden with, resulted from the loss and simultaneous obligation to provide for their relatives, and determined their fate in the post-roundup reality. The protagonists of Maciejowska's broadcast are women, who most often were left without support, the possibility to complain and commemorate the abductees, marked as families of "bandits", forced to conceal the truth about loss, isolated in their pain.

Suffering, which in communist reality had no right to be even recognized, became an inseparable component of their daily lives, and therefore determined the struggle for survival. And waiting. That's how Stanisława Bujnowska described it: "*she lived somehow because she had to. But there were times when I said: let the earth split open, let me come to you*" [6].

Most of the victims of the raid had missing status for several decades. This ruled out the process of mourning, since its real beginning could be the moment of realizing the fact of death of a relative. Of course, the families suspected that their relatives had been dead. When Katarzyna Orłowska saw her husband for the last time and asked him what happens to him, he replied in French: "They will kill" [15]. Franciszka Świerżbińska reminded: "*From Augustów they said that they came with a truck with shovels on board, took them somewhere into the woods and that they beat them there*" [16]. However, until the making of the programme, none of the families had received confirmation of the death of the missing, many of them hoped that they would live and counted on their return. "*I still wait today. I wait and I always look in this direction, it*

seems that he will come" [6] - said Melania Butkiewicz at the end of the 1980s.

Not mourning often meant not losing, and its proper process was additionally hampered by the lack of the right to sadness, a situation - as it is described by Nowak [17] - in which the loss was not recognized socially. This situation was due to the political circumstances in which Poland found itself after Yalta. For the communist authorities, the Soviet crime did not take place - because the "heroic" Red Army could only do legitimate and justified actions. According to the formal position of other representatives of the communist authorities, there was no crime, because in July 1945 there had been no Soviet Army in this area, which was an obvious lie. The missing citizens were neither found by the Polish Red Cross nor by others who were asked to look for them in the Soviet Union. They disappeared - as the protagonists of the broadcast repeated - *"like a stone [in the water]"*. The event was surrounded by mystery and silence. Authorities did not recognize the casualties, and relatives of the victims were left with a stigma of the family of "bandits", they could not honor the victims or memorialize events in any traditional or official form. Therefore, their right to remember and experience pain was not recognized. Social support also became impossible. Krystyna Świerzińska from Krasnybór took into her own hands the search for her father and other men taken from her town at the age of 17. Answers to the letters from the highest authorities in Poland did not come. There remained a sense of rejection by the state, which did not reach out to its citizens, in helplessness, longing and regret after losing a father. Mrs. Krystyna had dreams about her father who is coming back or who was found. In the programme she admitted: "I always thought that my dad is alive, and will come back. I waited, looked and prayed always for my daddy's return, I have lost my hope for a few years now" [16].

The suffering caused by the loss and impossibility of mourning, even if faded over the years, reminded itself at special moments: "The worst comes - said Stanisława Bujnowska - on All Saints' Day. Everyone carries flowers, candles, and there is nowhere to put these candles, there is no grave to be found" [6].

The pain could not find an outlet, it had to be "bottled up." As Claire Kebers wrote, *"silence in suffering [...] leads to isolation, to hopelessness, to lowering self-esteem"* and further: *"to talk about suffering is to heal it"* [1].

All the women of the 'United' broadcast lost their husbands in the roundup. Almost all of them were pregnant at the time their husbands were taken, and other children remained at their homes. They were all forced to work beyond their strength to provide for their offspring and themselves. All of them waited for decades for the "missing" to return.

They all idealized their lost husbands. In their memory, these men were beautiful, just and very good for wives and children, forgiving, resourceful. *"Because he was like a flower"* [15] - recalled Katarzyna Orłowska, and Stanisława Bujnowska said: "Always smiling, happy, lighthearted" [6]. None of them remarried. Mrs. Anna Bakuniewicz said that she had been left without anything, with a 6-year-old daughter, a 4-year-old son and another, born a few months after the roundup, child, about which she said: "he came to poverty". The child was sickly. Mrs. Anna blamed herself for its condition: *"Maybe the loss [of her husband] caused this. I cried so much for two years "* [6] - she said. In her dramatic memories she described the situation in which she had found herself. Despite the fact that over 40 years had passed, the memories were unusually expressive, they contained an emotional charge, testifying of the deep harm from that time: *"three days after birth, I went into the blizzard to look for a timber. I covered my belly with a towel and went out. I brought some but soon there was no timber anymore. And nobody brought it. Nobody helped. Nobody experienced it that way, in which I did."* The woman stated: *"I wanted to do away with my children and take my own life too"* [6].

In the face of the misfortunes that this woman endured, she surprises with her statement, which shows that she became stronger: *"Man is stronger than a horse. And when you still live, you must not give in until you die. "* Quoting Nina Ogińska-Bulik, women seem to benefit more from trauma. We may consider whether we are not dealing with this symptom of post-traumatic self development [18].

The second woman, Mrs. Anna, also came across the lack of support and understanding of the difficult situation she was in, she supported her children by working on the construction sites: *"The engineer comes to me and says: Mrs. Pużyńska, you will load the cement to the warehouse, and next bring the cement to the mixer: 50 bags - on my own - load 50 bags on the car and unload from it - on my own. The next day he comes to me again and says: Mrs. Pużyńska - you will go to the cement factory. I asked, if there wasn't anyone stronger than me anymore. He replied: you have a male rate, you have nothing to talk about. It's not a social care, you can still refuse to work. And what was I supposed to do, since I had two children?"* [6]. She was evicted from the house where she lived with her children, she suffered verbal abuse from her own family. Backbreaking work destroyed her health. *"Well, I do not know what to do anymore, as I do not sleep because of nerves, I'm exhausted. After all, I have my stomach here, below the navel. All from this cement I used to carry on my stomach. From pulling all these bales"* [6]. On the basis of a short relationship between a listener and the

protagonist, it is impossible to clearly diagnose the situation. However, helplessness and hopelessness inherent in depressive states articulated in those words: "*I do not want anything anymore. I would only wish to die*" [6]. It should not be deduced that all the suffering that afflicted women was only caused by the loss of husbands and life in exclusion. The psychological structure of a human leaves one in need of answers. In order to give meaning to suffering, one wants to know why the man was afflicted by it, what the reason was, what was wrong with it, what one's life would look like if it was not for the dramatic event that happened. Stanisława Bujnowska concluded: "*I understand that it would be thousand times better for me to be married.*" The analysis of a woman's relationship leads to the conclusion that it was extremely difficult for her to accept the loss of the person and of the lifestyle, the possibility to pursue desires that could be fulfilled if only the lost person remained alive.

In the women's consciousness, this roundup has become the source of their suffering. The unspoken perpetrators responsible for their unhappy lives were the Soviets, just like the captain, who said to Bujnowska: "*For you, my landlady, the war may yet begin.*" Unable to bury their husbands and say goodbye to them, they fought for survival for several decades. The war ended, the suffering, however, not.

Emotional pain was also caused by the guilt of the witnesses, who analyzed whether there wouldn't have been any tragic consequences if they had done things differently. Ireneusz Rapczyński and his father were warned about the approaching danger and they were told to hide. However, young Ireneusz persuaded his father to return home. In the programme, we listen to his confession: "*Now as I say it, I feel responsible for the things that happened*" [19]. Rapczyński's memories are very detailed and accurate. He gives dates, times and names. Images and thoughts are deeply rooted in his memory. Certainly invoked many times. It is as if re-experiencing trauma, associated with guilt, makes the experience more difficult, perhaps even more difficult than death itself [20].

For several decades, some of the families of the victims of the Augustów Roundup hoped for the return of their relatives. They waited for them in silence, often in anxiety and suffering, they carried on with their lives with the feeling of hurt and callousness of the system in which they had to function. They nursed - like Mieczysław Orłowski's daughter, who was only few years old during the raid - scraps of memories: "*He once gave me a ride on a bicycle, but it was so cold that he said [sobs – author's note] I can't speak, he said: go home, because you are cold. Such memories of daddy I have*" [15]. This fragment encoded in the memory does not indicate the state of closure of the

mourning process. As Dorota Kubacka-Jasiecka pointed out, this process depends on many factors, among which she mentioned the age at which the loss occurred, its type or meaning of it for the identity and sense of life [21].

CONCLUSIONS

For more than four decades the relatives of the victims lived as families of the bandits. It was not until the early 1990s that those people were granted the status of victims, and the roundup was called a war crime. Families have become victims. But the process of mourning has not been completed to many people. To this day, we do not know the burial place for those murdered in the roundup.

The types of suffering they have experienced partially reflect in the memories contained in the broadcasts of Alicja Maciejowska. Although it should be assumed that we do not receive the full picture. Because, as Małgorzata Okupnik pointed out: while enduring traumatic situations, information is coded in fragments [22].

The community of victims' families has not been tested in this aspect. Today tests could apply to the next generations. Paying attention to their suffering - it is signaling a problem - which would be located in the category of effects of the Augustów Roundup, and at the same time became a call for its thorough investigation. Although more than 70 years have passed since the raid, time has not healed all the wounds. But the time itself does not cure anything - Bogusław Block explained [23], pointing out that it is not the passing time that heals, but the possibility of expressing sorrow and receiving support from others. This possibility was undoubtedly provided by the documentaries of Alicja Maciejowska. They have contributed to some extent to depiction of the tragedy of others, maybe understanding of the difficult situation of the aforementioned families and recognition of their right to show suffering and sadness.

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