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The Vacuum and the Imagination of Space. The Cultural Role of the Żywnowski Publishing House

*In the autumn field the scarecrow looks like a visitor.
In the winter field the scarecrow looks like a beggar.
But not at all.
When you count the villagers, one, two...
you have to count the scarecrow too.¹*

Scarecrow

Abstract: Vacuum poses a challenge to imagination. Imagination seems expendable when everything is obvious and out in the open. More often than not, the imagined tends to be more terrifying than the real. The fear of an imaginary monster, the fear of fear itself – these are familiar inhabitants of not just a child’s imagination. However, it is a different kind of fear and a different kind of imagination that this chapter is going to be about; it will also tackle an entirely different kind of vacuum. My understanding of the ancient *horror vacui* – nature abhors a concept of vacuum – refers to such a state of mind which compels one to fill that empty space with entities – as a way of preserving them from obliteration. It is, ultimately, about the role of memory and its key actor, imagination – for is not the latter indispensable for the existence of the former?

The goal of this chapter was to examine the phenomenon of such imagination, which, born out of the commitment of a handful of passionate individuals, may attain a powerful moral dimension – so powerful in fact, that it is capable of permanently affecting the social environment of the town in which it happens and as a result change its populace’s perception of their familiar urban space forever. My main research interest has lain in studying the emotional and intellectual mechanisms of the process, in establishing what motivates some people to become dedicated to the

¹ Ko Un, *Ten Thousand Lives*, transl. Brother Anthony of Taizé, Young-moo Kim, Gary Gach, 2005.

idea of reinstating the memory of once vibrant, but today nonexistent local minority communities. To that purpose I relied on qualitative methodology (interviews, participant observation, and text analysis) which has enabled me to construct the ethnography of my subject of study, the Żyznowski Publishing House.

Key words: imagination in management, the experience of space and place, *horror vacui*, Jewish studies

Introduction

Vacuum poses a challenge to imagination. Imagination seems expendable when everything is obvious and out in the open.² Since childhood, we have been extracting shapes out of the darkness, illuminating them with our imagination. More often than not, the imagined tends to be more terrifying than the real. The fear of an imaginary monster, the fear of fear itself – these are familiar inhabitants of not just a child’s imagination. However, it is a different kind of fear and a different kind of imagination that this chapter is going to be about; it will also tackle an entirely different kind of vacuum. My understanding of the ancient *horror vacui* – nature abhors a concept of vacuum – refers to such a state of mind which compels one to fill that empty space with entities – as a way of preserving them from obliteration. It is, ultimately, about the role of memory and its key actor, imagination – for is not the latter indispensable for the existence of the former? Consequently, the case study featured in this chapter does not involve a revitalization project in any physical sense, rather, it describes the creation of an anthropological imaginarium, embedded in a moral imperative; that imperative consists in stimulating imagination in such a way that it becomes capable of recreating the raw wound of the missing space, healing it and, consequently, preventing it from dissolving into the narration of oblivion.

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² The publication is based on the article: R. Batko, *Horror vacui i wyobrażenia przestrzeni*, [in:] *Organizować z polotem. Wyobrażenia organizacyjna w praktyce*, M. Kostera (ed.), Warszawa 2013, pp. 105–124.

the memory of once vibrant, but today nonexistent local minority communities. To that purpose I relied on qualitative methodology (interviews, participant observation, and text analysis) which has enabled me to construct the ethnography of my subject of study, the Żyznowski Publishing House; also, I aspired to establish the role of imagination in projects such as theirs. Urszula and Wiesław Żyznowski are unique individuals, defying all definitions and flying in the face of every stereotype you might harbour regarding business executives. By day owners and CEOs of a large international company, in their free time they turn into passionate – and compassionate – individuals dedicated to the self-set goal of reinstating the memory of former – now long nonexistent – local minorities in the township of Wieliczka. The Żyznowski Publishing House is a family organization, run on principle as a *pro publico bono* enterprise; its headquarters are in the village of Siercza, near Wieliczka (famous for its Salt Mine Museum), in the province of Lesser Poland. The research process in itself has proved to be a most fascinating interaction; its subject being the imagination and methodology of the Publishers, or, perhaps first and foremost – researchers and ethnographers, we immediately felt intellectual compatibility. The interview abounded in unexpected interpretative and contextual twists, with the roles of the interviewer and interviewees often reversing, thus triggering the emergence of that unique self-awareness of research processes which only participant observation can provide.

Mythos into logos

I wish I could become a chronicler of places which never existed on the map, and events of which history never took any notice.³

The fear of empty space resembles writer's block – that all-too-familiar condition when, holding a pen in your hand and staring at the blank page in front of you, you are hoping for inspiration to arrive with that crucial opening sentence. While waiting, you start doodling, covering the page with random ornaments, geometric figures, and meaningless marks. When the first sentence finally arrives, there may not be enough room on the page to write it down. My belief is that we tend to repeat that very process in the social and historical context. Conditioned by the “fear of the empty” we tend to fill up the social and historical blank spaces with convenient cynical untruths, information displaying dilettante imbalance of proportions, or, in the best – case scenario – with naïve oblivion. The question is, how do you remove

³ J. Maurer, *Sobowtóry: opowiadania zebrane*, Kielce 2002, p. 180.

these irrelevant doodles from social memory and liberate the space to make room for the truth? What kind of imagination (and considerate compassion) is necessary to recreate and face the realness of the past? It requires tenacious commitment and effort, but also sufficient material means to be able to reclaim that void and people it again; in the case of the Żyznowski Publishing that process entailed recovering old photographs from the people of Wieliczka, and, among other things, flying over to Israel in order to obtain witness accounts from those who used to be known as the Jews of Wieliczka; often the interviews were conducted literally at the last minute, because the few still living members of the former Jewish community of Wieliczka, who could remember the city as it had been before the war, were over ninety years old. I wished to explore the motives, or, as Urszula and Wiesław Żyznowski simply call them – emotions – behind the projects I have chosen to discuss here.

As the Publishers say:

For us, publishing these books is definitely a way of filling a void. As far as our motives, or emotions behind it, among the most conscious “positively-charged” ones we could probably name our respect and sympathy for anonymous, non-historic characters, our interest in and compassion for the memories of the old and, last but not least, our affinity for small local initiatives. Emotions which could be described as “negative” are considerably stronger: aversion to careless forgetting, the fear of things passing, a feeling of leverage over those who are no longer able to tell their story (private correspondence with Urszula and Wiesław Żyznowski, 2012).

The first book they published was *Siercza, dach Wieliczki*⁴ [Eng. *Siercza, the rooftop of Wieliczka*] – the monography of the village Siercza near Wieliczka. In the foreword Wiesław Żyznowski writes:

The idea for a book about the village we live in originated from our great sentiment for the place from which, incidentally, my family roots derive; besides, I believe that this place, just like any other place on Earth, has a story which deserves to be told.⁵

During our interview he will add that, actually, everyone’s story deserves to be told. There is a “added value” resulting directly from the publication of their “local” books; *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*⁶ (Annotated Photographs of the People of Wieliczka), was published in 2009, has encouraged the readers to organize their own family archives, document information about people and places in the pictures, as well as record and honour the memoirs of the “elders” of their own “tribes”. In other words, the book has set in motion a social imagination which has begun to counteract *the horror vacui* on a family level. When I met the Żyznowskis for an interview in December 2012,

⁴ J. Piotrowicz, B. Krasnowolski, *Siercza, dach Wieliczki. Monografia wsi*, Siercza 2005.

⁵ W. Żyznowski, “Od Wydawcy,” in: *Siercza, dach Wieliczki, op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁶ W. Żyznowski, *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*, Siercza 2007.

they shared with me their own life stories. Wiesław Żyznowski graduated from Cracow's Academy of Economics and for over twenty years has been an owner and CEO of a successful business company, Mercator Medical Inc., which manufactures and distributes medical articles such as surgical dressing, protective clothing, surgical gloves etc., in Eastern and Central Europe. In 2007 he completed another course of study, attaining an MA degree in philosophy at the Jagiellonian University, followed a few years later by a PhD.

He explains:

I primarily consider myself a man of books, who by chance has stepped into the world of business. I became a businessman in 1989, which seemed like a natural course of action at the time, but as soon as I got that vital part of my life successfully organized, I started publishing and writing books. This truly is my world, and without much exaggeration I can say that I spend every free moment of my time either reading or writing (Wiesław Żyznowski).⁷

Running a publishing company is a business like any other, demanding discipline and managerial skills. Still, without the love of books and without their unique vision and passion regarding the subject matter – the compulsion to document stories which would otherwise become irretrievably lost once the storytellers were gone – they would never have been published. The Żyznowskis describe their publishing process in very modest terms, stating surprise as the main reason for undertaking the work:

Deep down, we are naïve social activists; the prevailing emotion with us is this constant surprised disbelief that no one before us has put these books together, no one has cared to write them (WŻ and UŻ).

As the study of the history of culture shows, the surprise at the existence of the lack, the void, has been perhaps the key factor stimulating humans to creatively fill that void.

When things happen in a place, the place becomes mythical. *Mythos*, as a universal story tells the timeless and profoundly symbolic truth about man, reflecting his fears, longings, his constant wrestling with the mysterious – in other words – it is the about life itself. As Inga Grześćzak notices, “myth can be molded in various ways, it is malleable, and lends itself easily to imagination.”⁸ It is this very quality of myth I consider the most interesting. While remaining unchanged at its core, it stays open to interpretation and

⁷ The quotations from the field of research come from an extensive interview conducted by Roman Batko with Urszula and Wiesław Żyznowski for the purposes of this chapter. The names of the interviewees have been abbreviated and bracketed together (WŻ and UŻ) in the further part of the text due the fact that their statements frequently tend to overlap and complement each other.

⁸ I. Grześćzak, *Alfabet antyczny*. Warszawa 2013, p. 82.

imagination. In some cases *mythos* can change into *logos*. Once the story is written down it attains a finite form – the book artifact is born. *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*⁹ (Annotated photographs of the People of Wieliczka) is an example of how a local community *mythos* becomes transformed into *logos* – in this case, a tangible album filled with stories and photographs.

In the first part of our interview, the publishers initially refrained from crediting the role of imagination in the process:

Wieliczka, quite simply, exists, along with the villages around it; the history of these places is out there, in the open. The way we see it, you just need to reach for these stories and give them a shape, a form – photographic, essayistic, whatever narrative seems adequate. It's all rather straightforward – there are stories out there and they need to be recorded and preserved somehow – that's all! (WŻ and UŻ).

They considered it their duty and at the same time a gesture of basic decency, to provide testimony:

It isn't a question of imagination, because you don't have to invent anything (people, places, events); everything is already there (WŻ and UŻ).

Everything that happens, in a sense lasts, if only in the evanescent memories of participants. We need imagination to provide the illuminated “photographic paper” which can only be transformed into a “photograph” – a visible picture – if someone “develops” it. It is at this point that imagination turns out to be crucial, defining the moment born out of fear of the empty. This is how Wiesław Żyznowski talks about this phenomenon when describing a picture of a girl on a swing taken in Wieliczka in the 1950s:

But does not this moment – along with countless other moments – still exist somewhere else? The moment itself perhaps does not, but an imprint of it might exist, and not necessarily on a paper photograph.¹⁰

Imagining things consists in creating pictures in one's mind. The Authors admit that when working on a book they use their imagination constantly, “imagining lots of things”. It seems obvious that a similar process must be triggered in readers: by following the imagination of the author, they simultaneously engage their own.

How does fear of the empty stimulate imagination? *Horror vacui* reflects our fundamental fear of nonexistence, not merely in physical sense; it also refers to the situation when no trace of us will remain in any human memory. This emptiness into which our being dissolves along with, ultimately, our individual life story seems imperative in activating the Publishers' imagination:

⁹ W. Żyznowski, *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*, op. cit.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

As humans, we all share the fear of nonexistence, of being no more. It is our intellectual reaction to the inevitable passage of all things in this world (WŻ and UŻ).

The condition described above resonates closely with an experience which Zygmunt Bauman defines as *liquid modernity*.¹¹ Wiesław Żyznowski attempts to deal with the “liquidity of forms, life, and memory,” as well as the pain caused by the void, by publishing books:

These books resemble notebooks or diaries where you write down events and stories; in this way you preserve them. What pains me is the fact that so much hasn't been written down, so much hasn't been told. In my mind telling a story equals with writing it down. There are lots of stories which haven't been told, and never will be. We are doing our best in our immediate region to grab the stories and write them down while we still can. But we are falling behind, stories keep eluding us, because the people who could tell them are dying (WŻ and UŻ).

Their book on the people of Wieliczka is around four hundred pages thick. Meticulous attention to detail, and graphic design visible on every one of them reflect the Publishers' consideration that their books should also be things of beauty. This is true of all their work, but perhaps particularly so in the case of the album *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012. Teksty i fotografie*¹² (*The Jews of Wieliczka and Klasna 1872–2012. Texts and photographs*).

What exactly is their book on the people of Wieliczka? Wiesław Żyznowski explains:

It is a collection of private photographs from family archives accompanied by notes and commentary. Is it something more than that? It is not for us to judge, or to know. It may be interpreted as a symbolic portrait of a citizen of Wieliczka, comprised of the many pictures of individual people. Or it could be regarded as a contribution to their unfinished life stories; maybe, it could even be looked at as a small input to the history of Wieliczka which came into being as a result of our sentimental, or perhaps moral consideration for things which are in danger of disappearing without a trace forever.¹³

Wiesław Żyznowski's philosophical doubt as to the ontic status of the book has its source – in my belief – in his awareness of various possible kinds of relationships which a text can establish with its readers. Because it is always a process, its results are never obvious to predict. To some this book will remain just a collection of photographs with commentary, to others it will become a “symbolic picture,” that which triggers the change of *mythos* into *logos*. The mythological Wieliczka has been depicted through the perspective of photographs grouped together according to subject matter and divided

¹¹ Z. Bauman, *Płynna nowoczesność*, Kraków 2006.

¹² U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012. Teksty i fotografie*, Sierca 2012.

¹³ W. Żyznowski, *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*, p. 10.

into several chapters: *In Childhood, At Home, Striking Poses, Religion, In Distress, At School, The Community, The Town*. There are some amazing stories there, such as the one of Kazimiera Miczyńska, the owner of the largest Wieliczka pharmacy during World War II, and holder of *the Righteous among the Nations* honorific title. Risking her own life in 1942 she sheltered and ultimately rescued the four-person Jewish family of the Kuchlers. The woman in the photograph is in her twilight years. Her eyes draw us in: there is wisdom, and fulfillment. Wrinkles, a peaceful smile, silence. The photograph seems to have been taken outside of time. The only thing reminding us of it is a small alarm-clock in the background, captured in the photograph as if by accident (Photo 1). There is nothing in there, either, to suggest the hardships and poverty Kazimiera Miczyńska suffered after the war. We learn about it



Photo 1. Kazimiera Miczyńska

Source: W. Żyznowski, *Wieliczenie na opisanych fotografiach*, Siercza 2009, p. 79.

only through the account of her friend, Mirosława Gruszczyńska who spoke with Anna Krzeczowska (one of the editors) in 2008:

The condition of the room where Kazia lived was terrible; nobody ever cleaned in there. One day, they sent over these ladies, social workers. They came in, Kazia said, “without any notice, they never told me what they came for”. So she told them to leave, said she had everything she needed there (...). Would you imagine, she didn’t even have running water there, nothing to wash or cook with. She never took any medication. After she died we found three thermometers in her room and no medication at all, not even aspirin. I remember one day we came over to see her, it was just before her patron saint’s feast day (St. Casimir’s Day, celebrated on March 4). The room was freezing. It couldn’t have been more than 10 degrees Celsius in there at the most. Right away we left, we went to the shops and bought an electric heater for her; my husband came back with and installed it in Kazia’s room immediately. Then, she said: “You know what? I so like to hear these Viennese waltzes on the radio”. We got her a small radio so she could listen to her music. She kept seven cats, or so. She didn’t care about material possessions much (...). She suffered from a serious joint condition, and she had trouble walking; she moved around the room by pushing a chair in front of her. She never had any crutches or canes. But whenever we came to see her, she always offered us coffee, she liked company, she was a great talker, great for telling stories.¹⁴

Not just stories like the one above make this book unique. Everyday life captured in photographs always looks different, somehow more ceremonious, and mysterious. A child on a swing, a Christmas tree, a handful of pictures of the Wieliczka Jews, numerous group and individual portraits with commentary provided by Wiesław Żyznowski, all this constitutes more than just a nostalgic journey into the past: it helps to fill and heal the painful void in our non-memory. Let us take the poignantly beautiful picture of Janina and Kazimierz Gurgul – the newlyweds lovingly looking into each other’s eyes – just before the outbreak of World War II. He will die by hanging in the Nazi death camp in Mauthausen, she will survive, never marry again, and raise their only son. She will remember these two prewar years for sixty long, postwar ones.¹⁵

Each photograph is a story in itself – if you can read it. Lack of material evidence and the helplessness of human memory are constant, discouraging companions in the Publishers’ experience:

Even when we locate photographs, no one can tell us more about the people in them (WŻ and UŻ).

Such photographs are a material evidence of the vacuum which will never be filled – it will remain the *fait accompli*, the triumph of *the horror vacui*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The experience of space and place: *chora* and *topos*

*The silence which resonated in the streets of Wieliczka after the Jews were gone had become so unbearable that it was impossible to ignore it any more.*¹⁶

Ancient Greeks learned about places through myth. A definite chunk of space they named *topos*, while the word *chora* referred to the essence of the place in the context of community.¹⁷ The Żyznowski Publishing does not, I believe, aspire to recreate the space and events in *the topos* sense. Rather, their work seems to aim at awakening the sense of community in Wieliczka – at defining anew its *chora*, the space which exists in our imagination when we delve deep into the archetypal reasons why we feel a sense of community, of belonging with the ones who had occupied the same space before us. We have never met them, and we have no way of finding out whether our assumptions and interpretations of their lives are at all close to their truth, but we stay connected, nevertheless; the essence of the place is preserved. Imagination searching for *the chora* does not merely fill the gaping void, but lifts it to a higher dimension. Ruth Ellen Gruber calls these actions:

“new authenticity” or a “real imaginary space” – something which seems real, because it has all the attributes of reality, while at the same time it is entirely different from the “reality” from which it is derived or which it attempts to recall.¹⁸

To me, the book which does precisely that is *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012. Teksty i fotografie*¹⁹ (The Jews of Wieliczka and Klasno 1872–2012. Texts and photographs). It attempts to understand *the chora* phenomenon of the Klasno shtetl, Wieliczka’s Jewish neighbourhood, and deal with *the horror vacui* which infected the town after the Holocaust. The Żyznowskis state they choose the subjects for their projects based on their natural impulses, meaning – they write about what they themselves would wish to know more about. In the case of this particular book, however, the reasons were much more numerous and complex. The decisive one was the amount of material which has not been included in *The annotated photographs of the People of*

¹⁶ W. Żyznowski, U. Żyznowska, “Wstęp,” in: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna*, op. cit.

¹⁷ E.V. Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment*, Chapel Hill 1988.

¹⁸ R.E. Gruber, “Poza wirtualną żydowskością... Prośba osiągnięcia równowagi pomiędzy miejscami rzeczywistymi, surrealnymi i naprawdę wyimaginowanymi,” in: M.A. Murzyn-Kupisz, J. Purchla (eds.), *Przywracanie Pamięci: Rewitalizacja Zabytkowych Dzielnic Żydowskich w Miastach Europy Środkowej*, Kraków 2008, p. 68.

¹⁹ U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna...*

Wieliczka, as the Publishers have put it – the Wieliczka Jews, quite simply, deserved that their story should be told separately. Below is one of the most touching arguments for publishing a book I have ever come across:

I know that it sounds corny, but there it is: we thought, they had left so much of their heart here. We write about this in the introduction. When we began to contact them, what ensued were all these unbelievable, emotional conversations we started having; they made us feel as if we were back in prewar Poland. It was as if we had suddenly opened all these incredible boxes, full of tightly packed emotions – as was the case with Nathan Kleinberger, who called me and said he hadn't spoken a word of Polish for sixty years. We were certain then this book was worth putting together even for these few people whom we'd met; but we also wanted it to become a tribute to the nameless thousands.

We like small projects which are created for a handful of readers. Because they must be *non profit* on principle. We don't see the reasoning that, being so small, they touch hardly anybody. They do, the shadows of our Jews are still there, all the time. We can see them (WŻ and UŻ).

Their motivation appears yet the more powerful when we realize just how much the Wieliczka Jews had been absent from the postwar history of the city. In the introduction, the Żyznowskis quote Elżbieta Janicka's *Festung Warschau. Raport z oblężonego miasta* (2011) (*Festung Warschau. Report from the Besieged City*), a book dedicated, among other things, to the quest for the monuments of Jewish martyrdom in the urban landscape of Warsaw:

[Janicka] in her book draws attention to how war monuments commemorating the martyrology of Poles in Warsaw architecturally dominate the ones commemorating the martyrology of Jews. In Wieliczka such comparison until recently would have been impossible, because no monuments of Jewish martyrdom existed in our urban landscape.²⁰

There is not a single street in Wieliczka named after a Jew, nothing to suggest Jews ever inhabited this city, were significant in its life, or distinguished themselves in any way in the local community:

And yet – says Urszula Żyznowska – before the war Wieliczka had a Jewish vice-mayor, Doctor Horowitz; Wieliczka Jews served in the Polish army, and a number of them made up the local intelligentsia circle (WŻ and UŻ).

There are some architectural traces in town of their prewar presence, such as, for instance, the building of the Big Synagogue, currently under renovation. But there are no Jews. The more painful yet is the almost complete absence of any historical sources regarding the Jews of Wieliczka, while contemporary books on the history of the city almost entirely ignore

²⁰ W. Żyznowski, U. Żyznowska, "Wstęp," in: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna...*, p. 19.

the subject, with the exception of a few cryptically laconic mentions. The problem appears perhaps at its most glaring when we page through *Słownik biograficzny wieliczkan*²¹ (The Biographical Dictionary of the People of Wieliczka), issued by the Muzeum Żup Krakowskich, an institution associated with the Wieliczka Salt Mine, whose foremost area of research and expertise are the sources pertaining to the history of the town. On none of the one hundred and eighty pages of the Biographical dictionary do we find any mentions of any of the Wieliczka Jews. The only biographical note indirectly referring to a Jew is the one dedicated to Professor Julian Aleksandrowicz, an eminent hematologist and faculty member of the Cracow Medical Academy, who found temporary shelter in Wieliczka after his escape from the Cracow ghetto – this is the only clue to his actual ethnicity, because the word “Jew” appears nowhere in print. Cracow has honoured him by naming one of its streets the Doktor Twardy Street, which was the Professor’s pseudonym during the war when he fought in a guerilla unit near Kielce; one of Cracow’s secondary schools is named after him as well. In Wieliczka, until very recently, there was silence, as if no Jews had ever inhabited the town and Jewish culture never affected it in any way. In 2010, after the publication of *the annotated photographs of the People of Wieliczka* the Muzeum Żup Krakowskich organized its own three-month exhibition named *Jews in Wieliczka – reviving the memory*. Despite the fact that the Saltworks Museum has unlimited access to various source materials and its tenured staff are able to conduct their research thanks to public funds – the museum is a state-maintained institution – they refused to share both their knowledge and materials with the Żyznowski Publishing:

We failed to convince them to participate in our idea; originally, we wanted the book about the Wieliczka Jews to be our shared project, however, the employees of this esteemed institution, which is funded and maintained with the taxpayers’ money, refused to share with us the materials at their disposal.²²

The above may serve as an embarrassingly sad, telling example of how some museums in Poland actually approach their statutory mission (*Ustawa o muzeach*, 2012)²³, defined as a duty to preserve our collective national heritage. If it had not been for the enkindled imagination of ordinary, private citizens, the above mentioned public institution would have done nothing to fill the blank spaces in the history of Wieliczka and the memory of its people.

²¹ W. Gawroński, *Słownik biograficzny wieliczkan*, Wieliczka 2008.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²³ Act of the 21st November 1996 on museums. J. of L. no 5, item 24. Unified act J. of L. 2012 item 987 except for art. 2–5.

Apart from obtaining testimony from the living Jews who could still remember Wieliczka as a multiethnic city, another great achievement of the book has been breaking the silence on the subject:

We did everything we could to make the publication coincide with the 70th anniversary of ousting the Jews from Wieliczka to the death camp in Belzec; we wanted to break that silence. After *the Annotated Photographs of the People of Wieliczka* came out, the Saltworks Museum organized its own exhibition dedicated to the Wieliczka Jews, but it had not been enough to break the overwhelming public silence; that has only happened very recently (WŻ and UŻ).

In 1983 thanks to the concerted efforts of the local authorities and the last Jews living in Wieliczka – Szymon and Pola Schnur – a memorial tablet was placed in the old Jewish cemetery, bearing the inscription: “To the memory of over thousand Polish Jews murdered in Wieliczka by Nazi oppressors in 1939–1942.”²⁴ A few months later the couple died: first Pola, and one hour later, having suffered a heart attack, Szymon passed away. The monument was their last accomplishment, and, ironically, it has become the last evidence of the “live Jewish presence in postwar Wieliczka.”²⁵ Located on the outskirts of the town, the monument had been neglected for years, overgrowing with grass and weeds, just like the few preserved matzevas – Jewish footstones – in the nearby old cemetery. It was only in 2006 that thanks to the “artists’ cleanup taskforce”, a group of inspired students from the Cracow Secondary Art School, the cemetery was finally cleaned up as a part of their “Life as inspiration for art” action *Cmentarze żydowskie w Polsce*²⁶ (*Jewish cemeteries in Poland*, 2013). Until then, along with the memorial monument, it had been ignored by the city authorities, its location being a mystery not only to visitors, but to the majority of the Wieliczka population as well. In the monographical work *Siercza, dach Wieliczki*²⁷ (*Siercza, the rooftop of Wieliczka*), published by Wiesław Żyznowski there is an annex written by Leszek Hońdo, a Hebraist, who had photographed the thirteen footstones in the Jewish cemetery and translated the inscriptions into Polish. Out of the total of several dozen surviving tombs only a few are preserved in their entirety, and even on them the inscriptions are illegible. It seems Leszek Hońdo acted just in time to save them from complete obliteration. Today, when we visit the cemetery, the matzevas attract our attention not only with the exotic-looking Hebrew inscriptions and symbols belonging to a different culture and religion; the names on the footstones, ripped out of the merciless void – Estera Miriam,

²⁴ W. Żyznowski, *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*, p. 198.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁶ *Cmentarze żydowskie w Polsce*, <http://www.kirkuty.xip.pl/wieliczka.htm> [accessed on: 23 January 2013].

²⁷ J. Piotrowicz, B. Krasnowolski, *op. cit.*

daughter of Moshe; Rivka, daughter of Jehuda; Meir Josef; Chana; Abraham Meir Polak²⁸ – resonate with nostalgia and evoke the memories of old Wieliczka, of the time when Jews were a vibrant community there.

The 70th anniversary of the ousting of the eight thousand Wieliczka Jews fell on 27 August 2012. The original initiative of Urszula and Wiesław Żyznowski to commemorate the tragic event received the approval and support of the mayor of Wieliczka. It was a historic moment: for the first time since the end of the war, local authorities participated in a ceremony honouring the martyred Jewish citizens of the town. On that day, a bilingual Polish-English memorial tablet was placed on one of the buildings in the Upper Market Square, bearing the below text:

On 27 August 1942, on the orders of the German occupiers, the Jews of Wieliczka and those from other places close by, who had been moved here, gathered in a meadow in nearby Bogucice, some ten thousand people in all. More than a thousand of the old and sick were shot in the Niepołomice Forest. Several hundred of those fit to work were sent to German labour camps. The rest perished in the gas chambers of the Bełżec death camp. Those who did not obey the summons were murdered later in Wieliczka and Grabówki. Barely a few members of Wieliczka's Jewish community survived.

The people of Wieliczka on the 70th anniversary of these events, 27 August 2012 (Tablet on the building in the Upper Market Square 7, Wieliczka, 2012).

On the mayor's initiative prior to the ceremony the Jewish cemetery was spruced up as well: the weeds and overgrown shrubs were removed, the road repaired and reinforced, the monument surroundings cleared, and new information tablets installed. The solemn ceremony in the Upper Market Square was attended by one of the very last survivors of the pogrom, Professor Uri Shmueli, while the mayor Artur Koziół said the words which had never before been uttered in Wieliczka:

If this market square, if these streets, could speak, they would tell a story which is beyond imagining. They would tell the story of the people who had lived in this town as its rightful citizens for ages (...), and they would also tell of a tragedy, an atrocity unthinkable in the history of this seven-hundred-year-old town. Therefore, I am asking you, before we begin, to stand up and honour with one minute of silence all those who in this very place, seventy years ago, had begun their final exodus from Wieliczka.²⁹

On the same day, 27 August 2012, a conference dedicated to the Jews of Wieliczka was held in the Salt City Educational and Recreational Centre (Solne Miasto). Just as they had intended, the Żyznowskis presented their book *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012. Teksty i fotografie*³⁰ (Jews of Wie-

²⁸ L. Hońdo, "Inskrypcje nagrobne na cmentarzu żydowskim," in: *Siercza, dach Wieliczki*, op. cit.

²⁹ A. Koziół, *Wystąpienie podczas uroczystości poświęconych siedemdziesiątej rocznicy zagłady Żydów z Wieliczki i okolic*, <http://www.zyznowski.pl/> [accessed on: 12 November 2014].

³⁰ U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna*, op. cit.

liczka and Klasno 1872–2012. Text and photographs). It seems that an invisible chord has finally been struck. What remains is but to hope that it was not a “one-off” effort, and that its effects will not be ignored, or forgotten. Urszula and Wiesław Żyznowski shared with me their belief that “once set in motion, the good is unstoppable” (WŻ and UŻ). Recently, plans have been made to renovate the Old Synagogue in Wieliczka. The Jewish Community of Cracow, with the support of the municipality of Wieliczka, has already started gathering documentation necessary for comprehensive historical preservation planning.

Imagination in the agathological horizon: on the compassion of imagination

The kind of imagination discussed here calls for an *agathological* horizon, defined by Józef Tischner in the following way:

An agathological horizon is the kind of horizon where the phenomenon of me and the phenomenon of the other are governed by a very particular kind of logos – the logos of good and evil, the ability to choose that which is better over that which is worse, the logos of rise and fall, victory and defeat, salvation and damnation. How does it work? When an encounter takes place, I do not know immediately. But I know every encounter is about this.³¹

This horizon is highly sensitive to good, the same way photographic film is sensitive to light. It reveals itself to us through an attitude characterized by a uniquely empathetic imagination, an imagination capable of filling the gaping voids with compassion; it is also an attitude which does not shy away from asking difficult questions, such as no one has dared ask before. In such agathological horizon belongs the ostensibly simple question asked by Wiesław and Urszula Żyznowski of the Wieliczka people: “Why do we live in Wieliczka, and Jews do not?”³² It is a most personal question; deeply disturbing, and impossible to ignore. Here is how Wiesław and Urszula Żyznowski explain their motives behind the publication of *the Jews of Wieliczka and Klasno 1872–2012*:

This book was born out our sincere conviction that every little thing that helps towards the preservation of the memory of things past is essentially good. By putting together

³¹ J. Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu. Wprowadzenie*, Paris 1990, p. 53.

³² W. Żyznowski, U. Żyznowska, “Wstęp,” in: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna, op. cit.*, p. 33.

this book we had hoped to contribute a little to the multiplication of the good, however naively that may sound.³³

If we wish to understand this need for compassion in recreating the fates of the Wieliczka Jews, we have to listen to the survivors of the Holocaust:

“Once there was a town, which was a town and a mother to the people of Israel, they called it Wieliczka, and it is no more” – wrote Holocaust survivor Miriam Skóra. The Wieliczka Jews disappeared from the history of their city in the most tragic way – suddenly and against their will. This book is about them.³⁴

Precisely because the Jewish minority in Wieliczka has disappeared, it “deserves more from the majority living here than a nod of recognition, it deserves compassion.”³⁵ The Publishers were emphatically aware how sensitive material they were dealing with:

When conducting our interviews, we constantly meet people who entrust us with their most treasured possessions – their memories, secrets, and emotions; the circumstances in which these encounters take place are uniquely sensitive, with us becoming confidantes to the people whom, in most cases, we have met in person for the first time; yet there seems to be no other way. All relationships are essentially built on kindness, but some, due to their fragility, require a special kind of gentle compassion (...). With regard to this book, of course we realized we were walking on very thin ice, we were aware of the kind of pent-up, traumatic emotions we might be reawakening. But we did not realize that to them, to “our Wieliczka Jews” we would be, first and foremost, Poles. We were not exactly ready for that. But there it was: to them, we were just Poles. Not researchers, not historians, or publishers: Poles. The situation called for great subtlety, also because we were dealing with the end of a certain era. When something is close to an end, the best one human being can do for another is offer compassion. We are fighting a constant battle with the passage of time. Sometimes we seem to be winning, and that gives us strength and inspiration to continue (WŻ and UŻ).

*Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012. Teksty i fotografie*³⁶ (Jews of Wieliczka and Klasno 1872–2012. Text and photographs) is a compilation of academic research, testimonies, interviews with the surviving Wieliczka Jews, and numerous rare photographs and documents which guide the reader’s imagination through that long lost world. The photographs depict prewar Wieliczka; there are buildings which have not survived until the present, but, more poignantly, there are people, captured by the lens in the midst of various everyday activities, most of whom – we know that today – would not live through the war...

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁴ <http://www.zyznowski.pl/>

³⁵ W. Żyznowski, U. Żyznowska, “Wstęp,” in: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

³⁶ U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012*, *op. cit.*

There is one photograph there which is hauntingly disturbing. First published in the *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*³⁷ (Annotated Photographs of the People of Wieliczka with Notes), it features a group of several dozen Jews sweeping the Upper Market Square (Photo 2). They are surrounded by a crowd of on-lookers and armed Wehrmacht soldiers. What strikes the viewer the most are the Jews' traditional clothes and their loneliness in the middle of the vast square. In a moment, beaten up and humiliated, they will be taken to the nearby village of Pawlikowice and shot to death. It will be one of the first pogroms of Jews in World War II:

On that day the market square was littered with rubbish left behind by traders and horses; it looked as if it had not been cleaned since the beginning of the war. The Germans picked this place to publicly "teach" the previously captured Jews some "proper work." Screaming and pushing them around they had made the Jews clean the whole square. The Jews "were sweeping, loading the wheelbarrows, dousing the ground with water, but their hands were shaking and they kept dropping everything – it was a heart-wrenching



Photo 2. Jews being forced to sweep the Upper Market Square before being executed, 12 September, 1939. Source: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012. Teksty i fotografie*, Sierca 2012, pp. 254–255.

³⁷ W. Żyznowski, *Wieliczanie na opisanych fotografiach*, op. cit.

sight.” The Germans made the Jews fill their pockets with horse manure. The on-lookers, consisting mainly of people who had come to the market that day, reacted in different ways; some laughed and clapped their hands, others looked on with disapproval and distress.³⁸

The mood in the Wieliczka market square on that horrific day resonates closely with the message of the famous poem by Czesław Miłosz, *Campo di Fiori*.³⁹ There are always “people of Rome or Warsaw” who “Haggle, laugh, make love / As they pass by martyrs’ pyres.” Because “the loneliness of the dying” is always the same, regardless of place and time.

The last days of August 1942 marked the most tragic time for the Wieliczka Jewish community. Maria Bill-Bajorkowa, who sheltered and aided Jews during the war, and passed away in 1962, included a shatteringly accurate account of the events in her diary titled *Wysiedlenie Żydów w Wieliczce*⁴⁰ (The Ousting of Jews from Wieliczka). The account first appeared in print in *The Jewish Community of Wieliczka. A Memorial Book*,⁴¹ and was also included in *The Jews of Wieliczka and Klasno 1872–2012*:

27 August 1942 (Thursday)

Jews have been told, under the penalty of death, to gather by seven o’clock in the morning near the railway station. The Jewish Police are very busy. They are directing all the Jews to the Bogucice meadows near the train tracks, to the west of the station and sawmill.

From five o’clock in the morning throngs of people have been passing by, dragging their children, carrying suitcases and all kinds of bundles. A tall woman wearing a white headscarf started the procession. Soon more women, children, youths and men followed.

At first they walked together in a crowd, then they spread out. Up to seven o’clock or so a continuous mass of people kept flooding by, and kept being ordered to go in direction of the meadows. A train with fifty carriages is waiting there.

At seven-forty five sharp, a gang of drunk soldiers, gendarmes and policemen ran out of Erna Kaczorowa’s restaurant. (...) They started running about, shooting every Jew in sight. There wasn’t a single street in Wieliczka where there wouldn’t be corpses lying about, the greatest number of them in Kilińskiego Street, by the Friedmans’ villa.

In Sienkiewicza Street three bodies were found: it was Weihemmer and the two Zimlers, father and son, the latter had a bleeding chest wound. Today is Thursday, it’s market day, when lots of farmers come into town. When the shooting started, they started running for their lives. Two country women got shot and a young man from the nearby village of Koźmice was killed; his surname was Janus.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁹ C. Miłosz, *The Collected Poems*, New York 1988, pp. 33–35.

⁴⁰ M. Skulimowski, “Zagłada szpitala żydowskiego w Wieliczce w 1942 roku,” in: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna*, op. cit.

⁴¹ S. Meiri (ed.), *The Jewish Community of Wieliczka. A Memorial Book*, Tel Aviv 2008.

The gendarmes raided every Jewish house, looking for more victims. If they found someone hiding, they shot them on the spot; they murdered a great number of women in this way.⁴²

For the survivors of the pogrom – both Poles and Jews – Wieliczka was no longer the same town. It became the city where horrible atrocities took place, a site of traumatic experiences:

Many of those who had witnessed it all began to suffer from heart conditions or nerves. It is a nightmare, hell on earth. Monstrous murderers, lunatics have been set loose upon our land.⁴³

Those who survived the Holocaust have kept silent about it for years. Often, not even the immediate family members were aware of their parents' or grandparents' traumatic past. Thanks to the unrelenting, yet deeply compassionate determination of Wiesław and Urszula Żyznowski, some of the Wieliczka Holocaust survivors have decided to speak of their experiences after all these years. Professor Uri Shmueli, encouraged by the upcoming book on the Jews of Wieliczka, and the town's preparations for the commemoration ceremony of the 70th anniversary of the pogrom, decided to write down his memories – *My Memoires*.⁴⁴

The kind of impact an awakened imagination, filling the empty space can have is best testified by the events which ensued after the publication of the book, say Urszula and Wiesław Żyznowski:

So much happened immediately following the publication. Nathan Kleinberger came to Wieliczka; for years he could not even bring himself to imagine a visit to Poland. For the first time since the war he came back in 1995; his impressions of the place were so frustrating that he vowed never to set foot in Wieliczka again; on top of that, his health was failing. But, in 2012, he came – a month after the anniversary – to show us how much he appreciated our work. He is 83 years old, has vision in only one eye, he has lost his hand, and his general condition is not the greatest. But he came back. For such gestures alone, it has been worth everything in the world to have made this book. It somehow tends to work out in this way: the projects on which we do not expect to get rich, repay us thousandfold compared to the commercial ones. These books return the favour, if only through the mere fact of their existence. Because this one is out there, these stories will be available to future generations (WŻ and UŻ).

⁴² M. Bill-Bajorkowa, "Urywek z pamiętnika," in: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna, op. cit.*, p. 323.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁴⁴ U. Shmueli, *My Memoires*, http://www.zyznowski.pl/?page_id=1387 [accessed on: 13 September 2014].

Conclusions

Horror vacui discloses itself unexpectedly. The space we have inhabited for years may seem familiar, tamed, and complete. Then suddenly, thanks to someone's imagination and effort, its tragic ambiguity, a wrenching lack within, and desolation – of the hitherto hidden void – becomes revealed.

Only after this book came out, after you physically held it in your hand and read it, did the vacuum become glaringly present. In our mind, this book has not filled this vacuum, but has rendered it tangible (WŻ and UŻ).

Inside *The Jews of Wieliczka and Klasno 1872–2012* you will find unique inserts with a meticulously recreated map of prewar Wieliczka showing the places associated with its Jewish community (Photo 3). Looking at the map, the people of Wieliczka today and anyone interested in the history of Polish Jews is able to imagine how vibrant and diverse the town used to be, with Jewish houses, temples and businesses such as the “Butchery,” “Einhorn’s



Photo 3. Drawing created by Maria Gromek and Urszula Żyznowska based on the 1939 Plan of Wieliczka from the private archive of Andrzej Gaczol. Book insert
Source: U. Żyznowska, A. Krzeczowska (eds.), *Żydzi Wieliczki i Klasna 1872–2012. Teksty i fotografie*, Sierca 2012.

liquors,” “Klinghofer’s colonial goods,” “Dorshei Tov Synagogue,” “Schnur’s notebooks and drawing blocks,” “Waksman’s haberdashery shop”...

The architecture of the former Klasno shtetl, along with its Big Synagogue, now for the most part in ruins, still reflects the original layout of the Jewish settlement. At the core of the publication of *The Jews of Wieliczka and Klasno 1872–2012*, the co-editor, Urszula Żyznowska places her personal longing and nostalgia for that lost world which she says she has only been able to recreate in her mind through the power of imagination:

I am an outsider in Wieliczka – I can only visualize the imaginary Klasno. When I walk through these streets, my perspective is different to that of the locals who have lived next to it for years. This book would not be so vastly comprehensive, so pedantically accurate, multifaceted and multithreaded if I myself had not insisted on being able to visualize everything “in my mind’s eye.” I needed to know where each person we were writing about had lived, where the events we were describing had happened. In a sense, mine was a detective’s assignment: Ariadna-like, I followed the thread until I reached the ball, I kept searching for ever new clues and traces until I was able to reconstruct the complete mockup of the Klasno shtetl, in both space and time (WŻ and UŻ).

Urszula Żyznowska’s comment resonates closely with Monika Kostera’s definition of imagination provided in her book *Organizations and archetypes*:

Imagination is more than just reaching for information; it is a state of mind, a mental perspicacity, a feeling of meaningfulness.⁴⁵

Clearly, then, imagination must coexist with a sense of purpose. How do the Publishers define this particular relationship? For the conclusion of this story of the adventures of imagination I have chosen a statement by Urszula Żyznowska who justifies the motives underlying their projects in the following way:

The same way some people decide to go trekking in unknown lands, we like to embark on imaginary journeys to places we write about. Each journey is an enterprise, and requires gathering specific means enabling you to realize your goal. The process of writing and publishing a book is no different. And then we want the book to be unique, beautiful and, ultimately, to bring joy (WŻ and UŻ).

This kind of imagination not only makes sense, but bravely stares back at *the horror vacui*.

⁴⁵ M. Kostera, *Organizations and Archetypes*, Cheltenham 2013, p. 36.

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