

Remembering Occupied Warsaw: Polish Narratives of World War II

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Erica L. Tucker's *Remembering Occupied Warsaw: Polish Narratives of World War II* is based on fieldwork that the author, an anthropologist, conducted in the Warsaw neighborhood of Żoliborz in the late 1990s. Drawing on some 25 life-history interviews, Tucker asks "how older ethnic Poles recollected and narrated the outbreak of war, the German occupation, and postwar recovery" in a series of chronologically organized chapters (4).

Żoliborz, of course, is not just any Warsaw neighborhood. Famous before the war for its modern housing and fashionable inhabitants (including many intellectuals, officers and civil servants), today it stands out as one of the few districts to have withstood the Nazis' destructive frenzy: whereas 92% of Warsaw's left bank was in ashes by 1944, Żoliborz, miraculously, survived largely intact. Today, strolling among its pre-war villas and flower-filled courtyards, one has the feeling of having stepped back into a vanished world, and Tucker appealingly conveys something of its *genius loci*, expressing great affection for the place and its inhabitants. Her subjects, meanwhile – exceptional among Warsawians, and far from typical among urban Poles of this generation – inhabit not only the same neighborhood, but in some cases, even the same homes they lived in as children. Such continuity in a city (and country) marked by urban destruction and displacement, Tucker writes, allows her to explore the role of place in memory, a theme that threads through the study. And yet, Tucker never convincingly explains how the experiences of the district's residents, exceptional in so many respects, relate to broader patterns of experience among "ethnic Poles."

In Tucker's own words, she approaches her subjects' narratives on three levels: as "oral histories, offering us a greater understanding of a particular historical moment"; as case studies of how people cope with war and trauma; and as illuminations of memory and identity (21-2). This is a broad mandate, and the results sometimes feel correspondingly shallow. Methodologically, the book comes closer to oral history than participant-observation, but it engages little with the secondary historical literature or other primary sources. It also does not venture far into the kinds of questions about memory in contemporary East Central Europe that have fruitfully occupied some other anthropologists of the region. Tucker draws on some interesting psychological findings by psychologists and sociologists about the ways in which people cope with wartime traumas, but ultimately, the book is at its best in its sympathetic portrayal of the subjects' stories and of their own understandings of the past, rather than in engaging with larger historical or cultural questions.

Chapter One sets the scene of pre-war Żoliborz, a new district developed in the 1920s. Tucker characterizes Żoliborz as an exceptionally close-knit community, pervaded by an ethos of civic-mindedness and a romantic ideology of patriotic sacrifice, widespread among the Polish intelligentsia, that significantly determined her subjects' responses to war. Chapters Two and Three explore the invasion of September 1939 and the brutally repressive occupation that followed. Tucker questions the assumption that the so-called "lost generation," its youth blighted by war, was irreparably damaged by its experiences. On the contrary, she shows that her subjects draw on their wartime memories as a source of strength and inspiration in the present. Tucker echoes this theme of spiritual resilience again in Chapter Four, on conspiracy and resistance, arguing that resistance (broadly understood) helped Poles "embody the values denied them by the Nazi occupation and...weave a web of solidarity that would allow them to preserve their culture" (109, 138).

Chapter Five, "Reflections on Helping Polish Jews," addresses a topic that, as Tucker acknowledges, is marginal to the wartime memories of most of her interlocutors. Few were directly involved in helping Jews, and few could name concrete examples of assistance by others – although, paradoxically, they often asserted that "many" Christian Poles helped Jews. The small handful of narrated cases of assistance reveal, moreover, that such efforts not only received little support from, but were often thwarted by, other Christian Poles. Tucker argues for the importance of understanding *how* "bystanders" remember Polish assistance to Jews and of studying not only the tiny percentage of successful rescue efforts, but also the "thwarted" and "limited" ones (161-162).

Chapter Six, on the Warsaw Uprising, contains some of the book's most emotionally charged narratives, reflecting the clash between subjects' romantic expectations of a "glorious" struggle and the hellish realities of urban warfare. Drawing upon Barbara Engelking's idea of the uprising as a "sacred time," however, Tucker finds that informants' evaluations of the uprising remain overwhelmingly positive – that it was, for many, "the time of their lives" (201).

In Chapter Seven, Tucker considers narratives of return and reconstruction after the uprising, focusing on postwar psychic recovery. Tucker concludes, not surprisingly, that "everyday needs for shelter, warmth, water and food pulled [people] back into the rhythm of the familiar." In particular, she stresses the importance of place: remembering how Żoliborz had been before the war, she argues, enabled people to "reinvest a place made foreign and threatening by violence with familiarity, security, and beauty" (224, 228). A final chapter explores the clash between official and unofficial narratives of the war in the Communist period, and more recently, the post-1989 rehabilitation of a "heroic" view of the war.

Tucker is guided by the principle that we all employ "narrative frames that are true to...[our] understandings of our lives." While some of her interlocutors, she writes, construct narrative frames that highlight the "ironic and absurd" aspects of war, the great majority prefer a "heroic" narrative of "a past that is salvific, a life lived as a moral document" (22, 254, 250). For the most part, this argument is convincingly and sensitively illustrated throughout.

Little of what the interviews reveal about the period ca. 1939-47 will surprise readers familiar with Polish history, however, whereas non-specialists may be led astray by Tucker's implied equation between Żoliborzians and "ethnic Poles." Given that the majority of "ethnic Poles" at the time were peasants, for example, Tucker's

definition of "normalcy" (a keyword in her discussion of psychic recovery) seems questionable, characterized as it is by middle-class expectations of security and plenty ("adults go to work, children go to school, people take care of one another, life resumes"). Many Poles never experienced this kind of "normalcy" even before the war.

Tucker also could have dug more deeply into uncomfortable places. She does not ask, for instance, how people made ends meet during the occupation (although one interviewee mentions that her mother sold bootleg liquor to the Germans – hardly consistent with a "heroic" narrative), or about domestic routines (did subjects' families keep servants? why are they invisible in these narratives?). Tucker notes that rape, which never came up in the interviews, was clearly taboo. One wishes however that, like Katherine Jolluck in her study of Polish deportees, she had not stopped there, but read deeper (or asked further) for insights into the relationship between sexuality and identity in times of violence. [1]

Finally, the press should have picked up on numerous mistranslations, typos, and repetitions. All the same, the book is a welcome addition to the still-scant body of studies on Poland in World War II in English. Students will respond well to Tucker's sympathetic approach and lucid style, and provided they consider the book's limitations, will benefit from her efforts to bring these compelling stories to a wider public.

[1] Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).



Zitierweise:

Dr. Katherine Lebow: Rezension zu: Erica Tucker: Remembering Occupied Warsaw. Polish Narratives of World War II, 2011, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2168#r3864>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2168?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=3864>