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# THOU SHALT NOT BE INDIFFERENT

On the deeper complexities of this entreaty.

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**M**arian Turcki's powerful speech on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp is forever etched in the memory of many of us who heard it: "...do not be indifferent, otherwise you should not be surprised when another Auschwitz crashes down on us." His speech focused on the different forms evil can take as it approaches slowly, imperceptibly, until it cannot be stopped.

Of course I wholly agree with Turcki's sentiments, but, as a historian, I have to remember that, in order to say we are indifferent to a given phenomenon, we must be aware of it in the first place. Our individual and collective awareness has shifted hugely over the years. How many people living in the past would have known about distant epidemics or earthquakes? How many people were aware of the destruction of Pompeii apart from those living nearby? It would be foolish to believe that even such an atrocity as the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima is known to everyone around the globe, but it certainly is very well documented. In the present day, in the era of ubiquitous media and the Internet, we are faced with a different threat to our ability to care about anything at all: a surfeit of information. It is difficult to truly care about all the

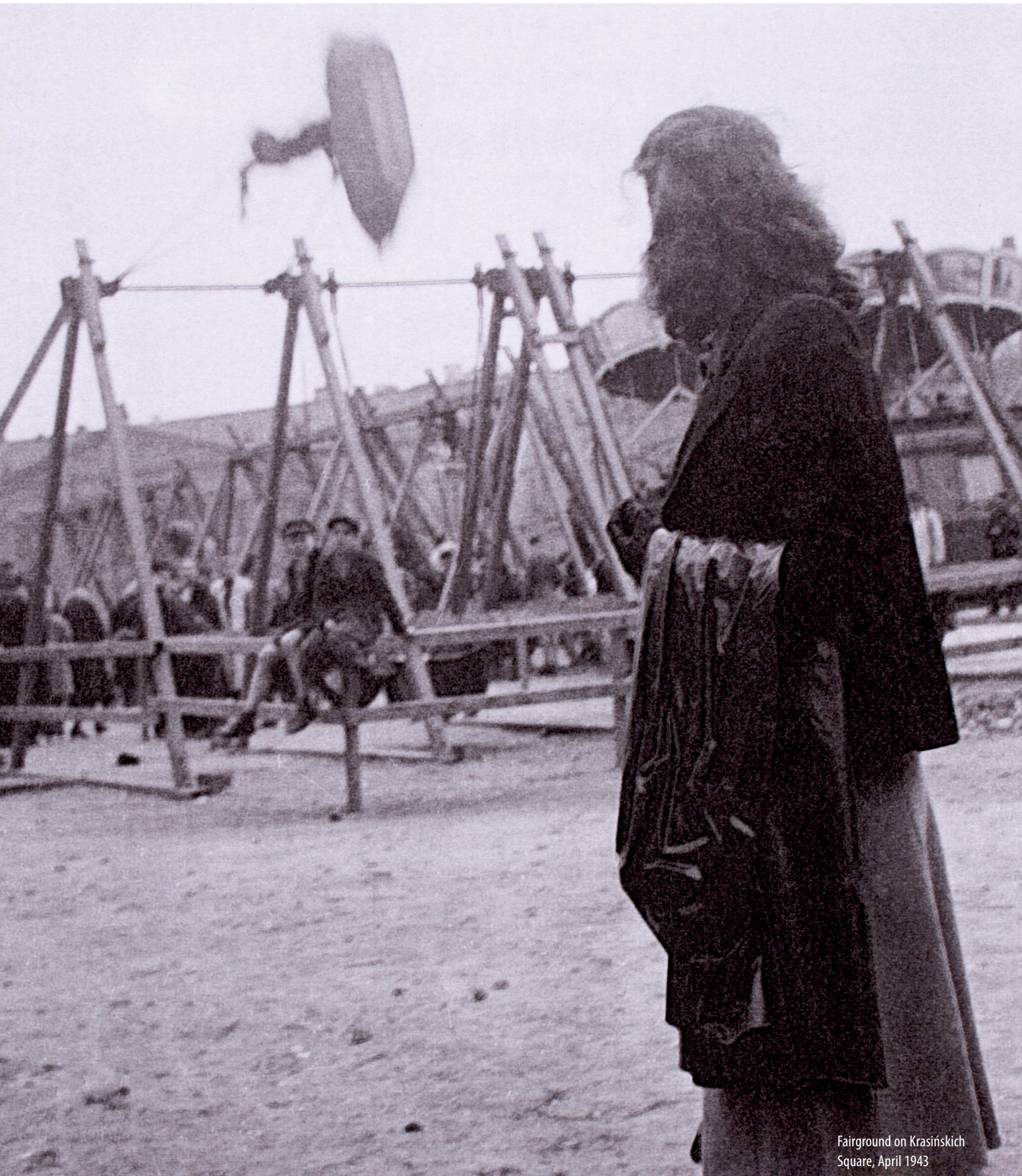
persecution, earthquakes, and other tragedies taking place all over the globe.

Another problem faced by historians is that "indifference" and active opposition to evil as it arises are tied to the system of values at a given time. Some events or phenomena had been widely ignored in the past because they were viewed as natural. Some are even recalled fondly, even though according to our current system of values they should be utterly rejected. We cannot change the past, but we should remember different aspects of events generally regarded as positive today. I am not suggesting any wide-scale "vetting" of statues or street names, but we should be aware that some of them do represent individuals who were widely revered at the time but whom we would be compelled to spit at today. Perhaps we could alternate between placing flowers by the statues one day, then spitting at them the next (!). One way of tackling this problem is revising the "official" version of history, as several countries are attempting. Unfortunately Poland has often proven resistant to such honest introspection.

## Death

Let us look at a few examples illustrating the concept of "thou shalt not be indifferent." Humans have perceived death differently over the centuries, with responses ranging from indifference to utter devastation. Yes, Niobe's grief turned her to stone and the Renaissance Polish poet Jan Kochanowski was compelled to pen a heartbreaking elegy upon the death of his infant daughter. At the same time it is hard to imagine that people who encountered death frequently, seeing ba-





Fairground on Krasin'skich Square, April 1943

JAN LISOWSKI; PHOTO FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE EMANUEL RINGELBLUM JEWISH HISTORICAL INSTITUTE IN WARSAW



bies and children pass away, responded the way we do now. After all, families back then had many children precisely because survival rates were so low, therefore loss was almost certainly expected – unlike today. In the past, people were most likely to die in their own home, surrounded by family, and to be buried at a local cemetery. This often happened to the relief of the rest of the family; in rural Poland, this attitude persisted into the interwar period. Old people were symbolically revered, almost to the point of saintliness, and rural communities held them in high regard, but there have also been hints of a certain, let's say, undeclared euthanasia. In any case, everything happened close to home.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, today we tend to regard death as something in opposition to nature, something which must be avoided at all cost, so we have pushed it away to hospitals and built cemeteries far from our daily paths. It so happens I once witnessed the death of a stranger in hospital. I am certain the medical staff did everything they could, but it felt detached, and the body being wheeled out on a gurney seemed rather impersonal.

It seems impossible to explain, for instance, people's indifference to the horrors of Jedwabne or other similar places.

It may sound horrific, but the fact remains that we frequently become indifferent to death. Emergency personnel who struggle to save lives and those working in the “death-care industry” simply have to desensitize themselves in order to do their jobs. Historical experience also shows that people turn indifferent towards death at times of major disasters such as war or epidemic.

#### Hanna Świda-Ziemba on Poland, 1945:

“During the war cruelty was simply a part of life, and death held no fear – death of one's enemies was a delight. None of us felt any compassion for Japan. Instead we said: ‘What a bomb! It obliterates whole cities. Hope it obliterates Moscow, Leningrad! Raze them to the ground!’ Even educated people said such things.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> B. Gapiński. *Ludzie starzy na wsi polskiej od schyłku XIX wieku po rok 1939* [Old people in Polish villages between the late 19th century and 1939]. Poznań 2014.

<sup>2</sup> H. Świda-Ziemba. *Uchwycić życie: Wspomnienia, dzienniki i listy – 1930–1989* [Capturing life: Memoirs, journals, and letters – 1930–1989]. Warsaw 2018, p. 77.

Some people regard death as an unavoidable element of warfare. Hitler had no qualms about sacrificing his army at Stalingrad; he simply didn't care about casualties among his soldiers once they had served their purpose. The Soviets' approach to war was similar, regarding their army as dispensable. Churchill reportedly found the decision to bomb German cities easy; it seems that the only individual personally involved in the Hiroshima bombing to express any regret was the co-pilot of the plane which dropped “Little Boy.” While the Warsaw Uprising was incomparable in scale, it also gives us food for thought. The author of a recently published book on the uprising writes: “Successive waves of insurgents threw themselves at the German positions. Why? The cause had long been lost. But all over Warsaw, all arguments about the sense of the campaign were utterly rejected. Nothing mattered apart from the here-and-now.” He describes a task given to a team of insurgents, “To say that it was crazy would be to say nothing at all.”<sup>3</sup>

It is true that a war cannot be fought without at least some bloodshed, even when the goal of the conflict is noble. The Allies took a long time to concern themselves with the fate of Jews during the war, for a range of reasons. For a start, the reported atrocities seemed so great as to be unbelievable, but it is also fair to say that they had different priorities. Some say that Poland had been betrayed, but if this is true, it certainly wasn't alone in its lot. For the Allies, forming a coalition with Stalin in order to defeat Hitler's Germany was more important than anything else.

#### “Others”

Over the millennia, people have been known to show terrifying indifference to others, at times going as far as not seeing them as people at all. Missionaries converting countless communities to Christianity did not rely on prayers alone; crusading knights were entirely indifferent to the suffering of their opponents. The European conquest of the Americas, and the foundation of the United States, killed countless victims. The entire project of colonization brought pain, suffering, and destruction upon the peoples being colonized, yet the colonizers, having supposedly recently discovered humanism, saw nothing wrong in what they were doing. The lives of indigenous people and their children was of no consequence to the new landlords. Of course everything was done with their best interests at heart (so it was claimed!). In fact, if anyone at the time was not indifferent to the suffering of slaves, it was

<sup>3</sup> S. Pawlina. *Wojna w kanałach: Opowieść o kanałach, ludziach i strachu w Powstaniu Warszawskim* [War in the trenches: Stories of trenches, people, and fear in the Warsaw Uprising]. Kraków 2019, p. 240, 381.

most likely because they were seen as a valuable workforce. It is unimaginable to us now that missionaries in South America were deeply concerned for the indigenous people whilst having no qualms about owning Black slaves working on their plantations – having baptized them first, of course.

Unfortunately, hate towards people seen as “others” and utter indifference to their suffering is still around today. During the Nazi era, individuals who were otherwise model citizens became cold-blooded murderers. Perhaps, if we are to try to understand, we should first ask about how we are conditioned by the social roles we are expected to play. Perhaps we should ask what happens to society when manipulative propaganda turns death into a slow, deliberate process, or why war is portrayed as a constant need of defense (in this instance, of Germany). But some things simply have no explanation. Supposedly cultured people listening to music performed by orchestras of inmates at concentration camps? Soldiers, visited by their wives, taking smiling photos of each other with gallows in the background? It makes no sense at all.

### Christmas in the camp

“Christmas came around, the time for remembering our families. Not that we prisoners were left much time – our SS Guards took good care of that. But in externals, at least, they acted as if Christmas was a festival of joy even for us. Fourteen days before Christmas Eve, a tree more than 10 meters tall was already erected on the parade ground, and covered with electric lights. These were switched on as soon as it got dark, and the tree looked quite festive, even here. Naturally enough, talk among the prisoners centered on one theme alone, especially in the evenings: our families – wives, children, parents – as each of us yearned for home.

On the night of December 23–24, 1941, some Russian prisoners tried to break out of the camp, but were captured by the SS guards. Some of the Russians were shot immediately, the rest, eight men, hanged on the morning of the twenty-fourth.

In order to humiliate those of us who were Christians, and presumably as a “sacrifice” to their “Germanic god,” the death sentence was carried out beside the Christmas tree, to the left and right of which long horizontal posts were erected on wooden supports, with four victims being tied up and hanged on either side. As a deterrent to any further escape attempt, or possibly to enhance the Christmas for us prisoners, the hanged men’s corpses were left in place for more than two days, until the Christmas feast was over.

A still meaner trick was the order of the camp commander that on Christmas Eve itself, two blocks had to appear in full strength in front of the Christmas tree and sing carols for a good half hour. A gruesome picture of a grotesque situation. While the crackling male chorus sang: “O’ Christmas tree, O’ Christmas tree, how green are your branches...,” the eight dead soldiers hung from their gallows and were swung to and fro by the wind.

I have never been able to rid myself of this terrible sight, and every Christmas, whenever I hear a carol sung – no matter how beautifully – I remember the Christmas tree at the Flossenbürg camp with its grisly ‘decorations.’”<sup>4</sup>

It seems impossible to explain people’s indifference to the horrors of Jedwabne or other similar places, even in the context of general hostility towards dif-

Some people regard death as an unavoidable element of warfare. Hitler had no qualms about sacrificing his army at Stalingrad.

ferent ethnic groups. The same could be said about pogroms; obviously the perpetrators of pogroms, or Poles hunting down Jews hiding out in towns or the countryside, weren’t all deranged. That’s just not the case. Even ordinary witnesses would have been shocked by the indifference frequently shown to others’ suffering. One survivor, hiding outside the ghetto, recalls in her memoirs how she witnessed another Jewish woman riding a train being arrested by the Nazis. She was shocked that the other passengers showed no concern, and it was clear they would have behaved very differently had the person being detained not been Jewish. Worse still, their comments were downright abusive (“I did not hear a single word of compassion for this pretty young woman, who was sentenced to death right before their eyes”<sup>5</sup>).

Today, immigrants are the main target of public indifference – which, in any case, is nothing new. Let us cast our minds back to how the US treated people

<sup>4</sup> H. Heger. *The Men with the Pink Triangle*. Merlin-Verlag 1980, trans. 1994 by Klaus Müller, pp. 102–103.

<sup>5</sup> H. Zawadzka. *Ucieczka z getta* [Escape from the ghetto]. Warsaw 2001, p. 22.

fleeing the Irish famine in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps the most shocking current aspect is the widespread refusal to help refugees escaping persecution on rudimentary boats and banning their vessels from ports. It is not far from how lepers were once treated – and no accident that the word has become something of a symbol. The only concern shown to lepers was out of fear of others catching the infection. All sufferers (apart from the wealthiest, perhaps) were cast out and seen as dead to the world. At times they were even put in symbolic tombs from which they emerged into a world of their own with no contact with the outside. More recent epidemics tend to affect faraway places so those of us in the developed world could remain in blissful ignorance. AIDS was widely ignored in the early days and not just because it was slow to spread: it was seen as a “gay disease” and therefore of no major consequence to mainstream society. It was only taken seriously once it turned out that it can affect anyone, to the extent that some countries

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became more concerned about AIDS than, say, TB; this is because the latter generally affects poor people with little influence. Since AIDS is just as likely to spread among the more affluent, the original indifference was eventually broken.

## Violence

For centuries human civilization was indifferent to torture and horrendous death. The myriad cruel “tests” inflicted on suspected witches or even burnings at the stake barely raised eyebrows. Heads of executed criminals were impaled on stakes for all to see and public, humiliating punishments such as pillories were common. Executions by guillotine – hailed as a more humane (!) form of capital punishment – were a great public spectacle in revolutionary France.

Soviet labor camps, the largest detainment camps in history, employed vast numbers of guards and NKVD officers who were indifferent to the prisoners' suffering. And it's not as though they were all deviants; they weren't even fanatics driven by the idea of building a world in a certain image. They were young

people from the same villages, towns, and cities as their prisoners, but just happened to be luckier. And it's worth adding that the idea of men beating their wives and children wasn't even something people were indifferent to, but rather entirely normal for centuries.

## Injustice

When did people become more widely concerned with social injustice? After all inequality has always been around and isn't a Marxist invention. Visions of true equality have existed since time immemorial, but at the same time the fate of the poor, the marginalized, the beggars, the cripples was simply dismissed. If anything, beggars were greatly convenient, so that the wealthy would be able to give alms and thus show their magnanimity. Dickens and Engels wrote extensively on the fates of slaves, serfs, and laborers, but this remained of little concern to others. And, if we're honest, few of us give much thought to the conditions at today's clothing factories in, say, Bangladesh. There are of course occasional campaigns against buying clothes made in factories where workers labor in inhuman conditions, but they only go so far, even if certain companies from wealthy countries are making efforts to improve working conditions in their overseas factories. Additionally, a full boycott of these countries would be disastrous for those very laborers. Unfortunately, the slump in demand in the face of the coronavirus pandemic is likely to have a similar effect. Western countries are largely indifferent to poverty in the Third World until the poor and starving come knocking at their doors – and even then the response is to build walls holding them out. We only seem concerned about poverty in Africa when immigrants come knocking at our borders, and in any case our response tends to revolve around building impenetrable walls.

For centuries hunger was so commonplace it was seen as normal. Was there widespread concern in England during the Irish famine of the mid-nineteenth century? Was anyone even remotely interested in the periodic droughts in the Nordeste region in Brazil – or elsewhere, for that matter? And it's not just because we are talking about an era before the development of the welfare state. Such tragedies may have been seen as a price worth paying to secure the prosperity of all (or, more specifically, all that survived). This was certainly the case with the Holodomor in Ukraine and the famine in China in the wake of the Great Leap Forward.

## Nature

Were people concerned about the natural world in past centuries? Nature was just... there, and if anything it was seen as a source of danger (dark forest,

wild animals, floods and so on). It always existed in the human consciousness as myriad symbols, such as mythologies of various mountain ranges. But it was also frequently used as a tool for inflicting human suffering, such as Siberian exiles and later labor camps. People who endured pain and suffering watched nature, not necessarily for its wild severity but as something to admire. The idea of nature lifting one's spirits from the confines of prison is common in human history.

#### **Władysław Szpilman on the ghetto:**

“Before night fell, we’d go out onto the balcony to breathe in air which up here was clearer than down below, in the grimy streets and passages. The curfew was passing, people were shut up in their homes; the pink spring sun, low over the horizon, gave a rosy glow to the tin roofs, flocks of white pigeons wheeled against the blue sky, the lilac blossom fragrance drifted from the nearby Saxon Garden over the walls all the way here, to our cursed district.”<sup>6</sup>

Humankind did not concern itself with the conditions or levels of natural resources for centuries. They were plentiful and widely exploited, especially during the industrial revolution. Steam railways are largely responsible for the deforestation of developed countries, since wood was used as fuel and to make railroad ties. People started to take more notice of the natural world as the industrial revolution was booming and cities expanding rapidly.

#### **Immigrant from northern Mazowsze writes from New York, ca. 1891:**

“Oh, how I long for home, here all you hear is noise, thousands of people walking by, factory whistles, tram bells, hucksters’ hoots, all instead of nightingales and skylarks, instead of roses, tulips, lilacs, barrels of rubbish, covered carts, stinking air. There are nightingales and flowers but you have to go a long way to find gardens, and who’ll pay for the time?”<sup>7</sup>

The natural world gradually entered the symbolism of different nations and became an important element of Romanticism. But the future was to be found in industrial cities – and communism also embraced

this attitude. Of course nature (our own nature!) was perfect for recreation, it was praised in popular songs and was something to be proud of, but Magnitogorsk – modelled on Manchester and Bristol – was something even finer. Rivers were given new courses and beauty had to give way to usefulness or perceived usefulness. And now, after centuries of overexploiting the natural world (regardless of the prevailing regime), we are starting to notice the droughts, climate change and polluted atmosphere we have caused. We cannot stay indifferent any longer.



Let’s turn our attention back to more mundane problems. We don’t react when we see someone sleeping on a park bench; we think they’re probably drunk or homeless – and in any case it’s none of our business, surely something for professionals to deal with. This shows our indifference to the person who might need help, right now, but somehow we make it fit in with

Only after centuries of our overexploitation (irrespective of the prevailing regime) is the natural world making itself felt.

our system of values. Except I once had trouble explaining to a child why a man curled up in the stairway didn’t need an ambulance...

We are commanded to give water to the thirsty, and it would appear to be fundamental to our system of values. Yet we find so many unwelcome people knocking at our doors we are in no rush to step up. There was a recent campaign in Warsaw with police posters in city buses warning people against individuals knocking on doors and asking for a drink of water.

The reality is that there are many serious issues which we are indifferent to and may even be oblivious to. Sometimes we need a shock to bring us back to reality – and coronavirus has certainly been a shock to the system.

I’m afraid I have a bad feeling about how the world will respond to Marian Turcki’s call “Don’t be indifferent!” The ongoing pandemic and the economic crisis which undoubtedly lies ahead are bound to bolster authoritarian and nationalist tendencies. We are working hard to combat the coronavirus – and let us hope that we can also combat those events Marian Turcki warns us about. ■

<sup>6</sup>Quote after K. Wróbel, *Zwierzęta w getcie warszawskim: Inna wersja historii* [Animals in the Warsaw ghetto: A different version of history], master’s thesis written under the guidance of Prof. P. Rodak, Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw, 2015.

<sup>7</sup>Letters from Polish immigrants to Brazil and the US. 1890-1891, prefaced and submitted to print by W. Kula, N. Assorodobraj-Kula, M. Kula, Warsaw 2012, p. 480 (letter 230).