

Interview with Prof. Barbara Engelking-Boni and Dr. Anna Engelking

## What Lies Beneath the Surface



Anna Engelking's private archives

Dr. Anna Engelking during fieldwork in Belarus, July 2011

**Academia:** You two are sisters, and you both conduct your own research working on different issues; you've never worked together. But there is one area that has figured in both of your work. Let's talk about rural life, its mythologization and demythologization.

**Barbara Engelking-Boni:** *It's interesting that we both found ourselves researching the countryside. Maybe it's because we're the latest in a long line of generations of Polish intelligentsia who had nothing to do with the countryside, and we are able to keep a sufficient distance to it. I found*

*myself here by accident and I'm only passing through; I'm following in the footsteps of dead Jews.*

**Let's we start from the stereotypical perception of the country: what do ordinary Poles associate the countryside with; what is its mythical image?**

**Anna Engelking:** *On one hand we have this idealized, romanticized stereotype depicting it as a treasure trove of true Slavic culture and a living source of "unspoiled" national tradition. It is inhabited by people who may be a little naïve, but they are un-*

*complicated, kind, and sincerely religious. On the other hand - since all stereotypes that arise from myth are ambivalent - we have the image of a dim, primitive, aggressive peasant, at times even likened to a devil on linguistic and mythical levels. In order to find a space between those two diametric opposites that would allow us to understand the peasant mentality in the right social and cultural context (allowing for regional variation), we must step outside everyday discourse, distance ourselves from the traditions we inherit from our arts and literature, and do reliable and unbiased fieldwork.*



**What does such research reveal? How does the stereotype compare against your findings in rural communities?**

**AE:** *The stereotype of one's own group is shaped relative to images of other groups around it. This observation is well known to the social sciences (it was described for instance by Florian Znaniecki and Józef Obrębski before WWII). The Belarusian peasants whom I study as an anthropologist in collective farms in various regions of the country used to construct images of their own group in relation to two socio-symbolic reference groups: the masters, and the Jews. This mechanism operated as part of a triangle. In this cultural context, the peasant/master disparity can be broken down into more detailed oppositions, such as work/lack of work (peasants endure the physical toil of working the land; the masters "do nothing"), or culture/lack of culture (masters are ascribed "culture," "learning," and other attributes of a higher social status, while peasants are "simple," "dim," uncultured," "savage"). By accepting this "lordly" stereotype, the peasant starts to perceive himself as a worse class of person: he suffers a social inferiority and strives to be more "bourgeois." These are enduring stereotypes, so it doesn't really matter that the "real" masters have long disappeared from the countryside. The image of a master is now projected onto city dwellers, officials, representatives of collective farms and local authorities, onto anyone who "doesn't toil" and is "cerebral." Taking this mechanism into consideration, we can attempt to answer one question frequently asked by Poles: why don't most Belarusians speak Belarusian? The popular stereotype of the Belarusian language there overlaps with the stereotype of a peasant dialect. And so if someone doesn't want to be perceived as an ignorant peasant, they must speak like the masters.*

**Let's move on to the other opposition...**

**AE:** *The peasant/Jew opposition is extremely important, and realizing that was one of my greatest research discov-*

*eries in Belarus. Even though the Jews have been physically absent since the war, their perception turned out to be so important to the linguistic and symbolic construction of the collective farmers' world that I was forced to study the problem even though I not previously intended to. It simply „lies on the surface" of the local consciousness. People talked about it spontaneously, unasked. I realized that the Jew category is required to place the peasant group in a broader context, and to construct its identity. This opposition seems to be even more interesting than the peasant/master one. We can divide it into two subcategories: peasant/Jew and Christian/Jew.*

**Young people are quite different. It's like an ersatz multiculturalism in Poland. Young people travel, they have broader horizons, they have fewer hang-ups**

*The first can be used to build an image of a peasant analogous to the one where his opponent is the master. The Jewish "lack of work," their "wheeling and dealing," reconfirms the peasants in their identity as men working the earth. The Jewish mobility - they travel, mill about, mediate - confirms that the peasants are staid, settled, local.*

**Peasants perceive themselves as Christians; they work the earth, they are simple and uneducated; they are Christian.**

**AE:** *This aspect is extremely interesting in the Belarusian studies. The Christian/Jew opposition seems to be the foundation of the peasants' identity as Christians. The Jews are similar to the peasants in that they believe in God and pray to him, but unlike them they aren't baptized and don't believe in Christ. Without them the peasants' self-perception as Christian could not define its specificity; it would have nothing to refer or compare to. It should be remembered that Belarus has always been and remains highly diversified in terms of faith and culture. In Poland we have a*

*binary faith system of Catholics/Jews. In Belarus there's a triad of Orthodox/Catholic/Jew; in the past there were also Muslims and today there is a growing group of neoprotestant denominations. That's why peasants, building their identity as Christians, traditionally had to become part of a multilayer reference system whose basic assumption was "There is one true God, and each faith believes in its own way." The Jew/Christian opposition also suggests that the former are the "original faith", the latter "Baptized Jews." The layer of consciousness and cultural memory of Belarusian villagers features an old model of cohabitation (non-exclusion)*

*of faiths, naturally accompanied by the Christian anti-Judaism, although contemporary anti-Semitism seems weaker in Belarus than in Poland.*

**Their attitude to Jews was different? How does the image of the Jew exist in the consciousness of the contemporary village?**

**AE:** *This is a complex topic and it's too early for analysis. Attitudes of Belarusian peasants to Jews requires further in-depth study. Do you remember the book by Alina Cała, "The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture"? The materials she gathered in the Białystok region differed from those from central and southern Poland; she noted that in the former region tales of our Jewish neighbors were shrouded in a different, less hostile atmosphere. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Paweł Buszko made similar observations in their studies of Russian Orthodox and Jewish communities in the Podlasie region. My Belarusian field materials don't contain a single utterance along the lines of "It's a good thing that there are no more Jews, that Hitler sorted them*



out. "Instead there's a powerful element of sorrow and grief - as though those people were still being mourned.

**So does this mean that they didn't murder and betray Jews during the war?**

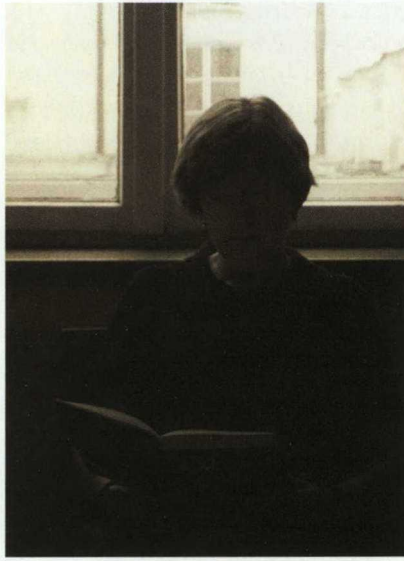
**BE:** My research shows that this region was no different to Poland. Do they talk about it?

**AE:** They are open about it.

**BE:** But do they say "the guy down the street betrayed a Jew," or "I betrayed a Jew"?

**AE:** In Belarus they mainly talk about "their" policemen, who perpetrated murders of Jews as part of the Nazi auxiliary police. They talk about both the betrayal of Jews and their being hidden, about the incredibly complicated, brutal relationships in the Jews-villagers-partisans triangle. I have an example of a story from the Catholic village of Nacza (Nacha), located between Raduń and Eišiškės in southern Lithuania. There's a huge expanse of forest that concealed Polish Home Army partisans. Just after the liquidation of the Ghettos around there, Jewish bunkers sprang up in the forests. For many months there were Jews prowling around the surrounding countryside in search for food; at times pleading, at times plundering. The villagers grew weary, feeling terrorized. The Home Army partisans decided to "sort things out" by throwing grenades into the bunkers. One of the women I talked to, her brother was one of those partisans and he was killed by a piece of shrapnel. He's buried at the cemetery in Nacza. Every year, at All Saints' Eve, an official Polish delegation turns up and places white-and-red wreaths at the graves of the Home Army soldiers, including those who died murdering Jews. The delegation likely doesn't know; the village does and talks about it.

**BE:** After the war there arose a myth of the countryside having preserved Polish traditions and courageously stood up to the occupants. Everyone had fought in the Peasants' Battalions, hid fugitives, fed the cities. This persistent positive version of events stems from the fact that the sources used in researching the countryside during the occupation are the results of numer-



Patrycja Dolowy

**Barbara Engelking-Boni's latest book describes the fates of Jews seeking shelter in the Polish countryside between 1942-1945**

ous competitions for WWII recollections announced since 1940s. The first were published in several volumes edited by Krystyna Kerstenowa and Tomasz Szarota. Peasants' own memoirs, on the other hand, show things in a different light - Roch Sulima wrote about this - but those memoirs are few and far between, they need to be found first. Before the war, 70% of the population lived in the country; the majority were illiterate.

**There were very few who would have been able to write memoirs at all.**

**BE:** It's also a very specific group, often connected with the peasant movement; it includes those who were educated, outsiders. Conversely, court records contain voices of the illiterate peasant masses. The majority of testimonies are signed with a cross or a fingerprint. Those people had no other opportunity to say publicly what had gone on in the countryside during the war. Such testimonies come across as incredibly authentic and make for fascinating reading; I'm surprised they've remained ignored in studies into the history of the Polish countryside. So far in my research I haven't seen any regional variation in accounts of the betrayal and murder of Jews, but perhaps that's just a specificity of the source. If anything good

happened anywhere, I don't know about it. The sources only describe evil incarnate. In any case the testimonies given at police stations or in courtrooms are quite specific. There are various biases and lies... In the Jedwabne case, all witnesses ended up backing out. The perpetrators controlled the village and there was no chance for an impartial trial. Things were similar in Gniewczyna. We are soon going to publish a book on the "Annihilation of the House of Trinczer." For three days a group of men kept 18 Jews, including Lejb Trinczer and his family, as well as children, in his house opposite the church in the village centre. They were kept in the cellar and called upstairs in turn. The women were raped, the men beaten; it was a tale of true terror. The captors wanted the Jews to reveal whom they had entrusted their belongings to. Once they were satisfied and found out where they could get their hands on quilts, candlesticks, crockery and cooking pots, they called in the Nazis, who killed all the Jews, including the children, out in the courtyard. One woman managed to escape and ran up to the church, but the priest sent her away. The scene was witnessed by a young boy, who was too afraid to talk about it for many years after the war. He finally revealed the story a few years ago.

**AE:** You work on sources different to mine. We use different methodologies and look at our subject from different points of view. You're interested in the Jewish perspective, I'm interested in the peasant perspective. I study mentality and memories, using contemporary sources, ones I "create" myself. You study preexisting, archive materials.

**BE:** I don't study contemporaneity. I'm interested in the past and the Jewish perspective. I look at peasants through the eyes of the Jews; I want to have as much information as possible about the course of events.

**AE:** Well, I'm not really interested in such facts. Anthropologists don't have access to hard facts anyway, just their interpretation through people's thoughts and opinions.

**BE:** But you could use those court testimonies for your purposes?



**AE:** *Of course I could. That could be an idea for further research.*

**BE:** *There is one diary I am aware of, whose anonymous author displays an extraordinary ethnographic flair in her descriptions of peasant customs.*

**AE:** *That's what struck me when I was reading your book - this Jewish stereotype of the peasant.*

**We also noticed it. Could we talk about it some more?**

**BE:** *The Jewish stereotype of the peasant is fascinating, but we don't have sufficient data. In any case it wasn't the main subject of our research. In the book it features more as a secondary, minor theme - more of an invitation to take up the subject to study it further.*

**And Sundays... That's an important topic.**

**BE:** *That's something I can't get my head around - the complicity of the Church in the Holocaust. Why didn't it do anything? Why didn't it react? Archbishop Adam Stefan Sapieha did at least submit a letter to Governor Hans Frank explaining that young Poles were being called up to join auxiliary forces where they were expected to participate in the extermination of Jews, which was bad for their morale. Of course the Church had certain individuals, heroes, people who took it upon themselves to save others - but that wasn't unique to the organization. There were scores of priests who wouldn't baptize or give communion to Jewish children as a matter of principle. All they needed was a little empathy, yet they didn't have any...*

**AE:** *It's not just a lack of empathy, though. These are powerful ideological forces - symbolic and magical structures - linked with the belief that Jews murdered Christ, these particular Jews, here and now.*

**BE:** *I was reading the dossier on the case of Wólka Mędrzechowska near Kraków, where a Jewish family was hiding in the reeds by the Vistula. Suddenly, on the Wednesday before Easter, as they were leaving the church, local people seemed to*

*remember the Jews. The entire village went to round them up; they caught them and called in the Nazis, who shot the family. A little boy, maybe four years old, managed to escape and wandered round the village for a few days. Then on Holy Saturday one of the locals left the church service and caught the boy. A local German gendarme killed him on the spot.*

**AE:** *It's a mechanism that's been well described by anthropologists. The Holy Week awakens the Christian antagonism against the Jews, connected with the symbolism of Judas and Christ's passion. It's an archaic way of reliving the myth - it happens in the present, and Christ is murdered by the Jews once again. So, they must be repaid here and now. Sundays have similar connotations, albeit weaker. People used to seek out Jews to avenge the death of Christ.*

**That's why more people were killed on Sundays, after Mass...**

**AE:** *Based on my Belarusian research, I can add that there's a marked difference between Catholic and Orthodox communities in their opinion of and attitudes towards Jews. In Catholic villages the intensity of anti-Judaism and acts of betraying and murdering Jews during the war seem greater. They are also the source of the well-documented blood legends, in contrast to Orthodox villages. This doesn't mean betrayal and murder didn't happen at all in the latter, but they were less common. Orthodox believers don't go to church as frequently as Catholics, and during the interwar period they didn't absorb the Polish and Catholic anti-Semitic propaganda as easily. However, at this stage of my research this is just a hypothesis.*

**Do you both think that Barbara's book can change anything in a country as anti-Semitic as Poland? What can it do?**

**BE:** *The book won't actually change anything, but if it's true to say that empathy is greater in multicultural regions then we need to return to this multicultural society; we need our Jews.*

**So we need to accomplish Yael Bartana's artistic project?**

**AE:** *I would love that to happen. But it will take time, because the Jewish stereotype forms part of the Christian identity. While Polish people continue to identify with the exclusive Catholic definition, the image of Jews as antagonists will persist.*

**BE:** *But things are starting to change. The discussion that took place earlier this year was less fierce than a similar one a few years ago. Jedwabne was a problem; people were squabbling over the numbers, saying that you can't fit two thousand Jews in barn, so it must all be lies. Things are better now, no one is questioning the facts. In any case young people are quite different. It's like an ersatz multiculturalism in Poland. Young people travel, they have broader horizons, they have fewer hang-ups. Their Polishness isn't so confirmed and uncompromising. It's just a shame that Jedwabne doesn't feature in textbooks - that might bring changes in the long term.*

Interviewed by  
**Patrycja Dołowy and Anna Zawadzka**  
Warsaw, May 2011

**Prof. Barbara Engelking-Boni** heads the Center for Holocaust Research at the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. She is the author of numerous scientific articles and books on the Holocaust published in Poland and abroad.

**Dr. Anna Engelking** is director of the PAS Institute of Slavic Studies and member of the Ethnolinguistic Commission of the PAS Committee on Linguistics. She is the author of numerous publications, including books in the fields of ethnolinguistics and cultural anthropology.